

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Otherwise Engaged

Donald Spoto

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## About the Book

In 1956, at the age of 22, Alan Bates was cast in John Osborne's controversial play, *Look Back in Anger*. The play changed the course of British theatre - and of Alan's life. With a sudden rush of fame, he became a member of a new circle of actors at the Royal Court: the English Stage Company. From then on, he also worked steadily in television and won international acclaim for his roles in a number of major films, from *A Kind of Loving* and *Zorba the Greek* to *Women in Love*. But his personal life was not always as seemingly straightforward as his career - his relationships, including that with his wife, Victoria Ward, were often turbulent. Drawing on dozens of interviews with his family, lovers, colleagues and friends - and mining a rich store of primary research - Donald Spoto chronicles Alan's achievements as a performer against the backdrop of a complicated personal life.

## About the Author

Donald Spoto was born near New York City in 1941 and received his PhD from Fordham University in 1970. He is the author of 24 books, including internationally bestselling biographies of Alfred Hitchcock, Tennessee Williams, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe and Ingrid Bergman. His acclaimed biography of Audrey Hepburn, *Enchantment*, is available in paperback from Arrow. He is married to the Danish academic administrator Ole Flemming Larsen. They live in a quiet village an hour's drive from Copenhagen.

*Also by Donald Spoto*

Joan: The Mysterious Life of the Heretic who Became a  
Saint  
Enchantment: The Life of Audrey Hepburn  
In Silence: Why We Pray  
Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis Assisi  
Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life  
The Hidden Jesus: A New Life  
Diana - The Last Year  
Notorious: The Life of Ingrid Bergman  
Rebel: The Life and Legend of James Dean  
Dynasty: The House of Windsor from Victoria to Diana  
A Passion for Life: The Biography of Elizabeth Taylor  
Marilyn Monroe: The Biography  
Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich  
Laurence Olivier: A Life  
Madcap: The Life of Preston Sturges  
Lenya: A Life  
Falling in Love Again: Marlene Dietrich - A Photo-Essay  
The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams  
The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock  
Stanley Kramer: Film Maker  
Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man  
The Art of Alfred Hitchcock

OTHERWISE ENGAGED  
The Life of  
**ALAN BATES**  
DONALD SPOTO



arrow books

for Paul Sidey  
with gratitude for three decades of friendship

'Soave sia il vento ...'



'The truth of people's lives is what you've set out to do, and  
it's usually a phenomenal story.  
Let's have that person!'<sup>1</sup>

Alan Bates, December 1997

## Acknowledgements

During the autumn of 2004, I received a telephone call from Michael Linnit, whom I had met almost twenty years ago through our mutual friends, Laurence and Mary Evans. With Rosalind Chatto, Michael directs the highly respected London theatrical agency, Chatto & Linnit Ltd. He asked if I would be interested in undertaking the authorised biography of Alan Bates, whom he and Ros represented for many years. Michael further informed me that I would have the full and enthusiastic support of Alan's family. Immediately, I responded affirmatively, as my high regard for this great actor went back many years. Throughout my research and the writing of *Otherwise Engaged*, I had the constant help of Michael and Ros, and I begin these acknowledgements with a deep expression of gratitude to them for their confidence in me and my work, for the many introductions they provided, and for their wise counsel and guidance.

Soon after that, I had my first meetings with Alan's son, Benedick Bates, and with Alan's brother, Martin Bates. I owe Martin and Ben far more than I can say for their extraordinary kindness to me; their undiluted trust; their generous, full and honest sharing of memories during interviews, telephone calls and letters; and their ready transfer to me of the complete cache of Alan's personal and professional papers, letters, documents and ephemera - box after box, bag after bag, file after file, which they turned over without editing or censorship. From the beginning, Martin and Ben were my major allies and chief

supporters; they also became my good friends. In Alan's family, too, his brother John and his niece and nephew, Lauren and Karl, shared especially warm, touching and amusing memories.

In the offices of Chatto & Linnit, their longtime associate, Lucy Robinson, at once came aboard as my de facto research assistant. How fortunate I was in having her daily assistance; her extraordinary knowledge of theatre history in general and of Alan's career in particular; her quick access to important facts and sources; her good humour despite my many requests, phone interruptions and electronic communications - and in her case, too, the offer of abiding friendship.

In the New York offices of International Creative Management, I was fortunate to be welcomed by another much respected agent, Boaty Boatwright. She also knew Alan well over many years and facilitated my work in Manhattan and my introductions to his colleagues and friends in the United States. Boaty's assistant, Kevin McEleny, has my thanks, too, for his kindness and help.

In the course of my research, many people who were significant in Alan's life and career granted me important interviews. Their memories, impressions, insights and contributions provided a unique kind of rich understanding, and I am very grateful to them all for their generous assistance and their confidence:

Niema Ash, Alan Bennett, Jaffray Cuyler, Laretta Feldman, Rosemary Geddes, Nickolas Grace, Elizabeth Grant, Simon Gray, Georgina Hale, Sir Peter Hall, Yardena Harari, Gerard Hastings, Glenda Jackson, Gemma Jones, Felicity Kendal, Arthur Laurents, Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Marie Malavieille, Hayley Mills, Conrad Monk, Joanna Pettet, Angharad Rees, David Storey, Paul Taylor, Ian White, Gareth Wigan, Peter Wyngarde.

Tony Gooch, a knowledgeable and generous film collector, enabled me to view several especially obscure Alan Bates films. For various other kinds of help I warmly acknowledge Mart Crowley, Mary Evans, Davie Evans, Lewis Falb, Charles Marowitz and Gerald Pinciss.

My brother-in-law, John Møller - not for the first time and doubtless not the last - devoted liberal time and his remarkable artistic talents to preparing for publication the many photographs for this book. Indeed, many people helped me in so many ways during the preparation of *Otherwise Engaged* that I am fearful of having omitted a name; if I have, I ask forgiveness - and a prompt letter of correction.

\* \* \*

Karl and Mona Malden always have a special claim on my deepest thanks for their abiding devotion to me and my work; my life would be much the poorer without their faithfulness and loyalty.

My London agent, Elizabeth Sheinkman, in the offices of Curtis Brown Ltd, is a treasure. I do not know how she does all that she does, but I am glad and grateful for her many gifts - among them her intelligence, perception, humour, warmth and promptness.

Every day I am sustained in ways past counting by Ole Flemming Larsen, with whom I share my life. With his customary endless patience and astute insights, he watched something like sixty-five Alan Bates movies and television dramas with me, always providing valuable comments and raising important questions for my consideration. Especially in the last stages of the manuscript, he was my strongest support. Ole's commitment to me, and his nurturing of my work, defy my comprehension, not to say articulation, and his sheer

goodness almost takes my breath away. My life is very blessed indeed.

I first met Paul Sidey almost thirty years ago. Our friendship has endured without interruption, it has continued through a number of publishing collaborations, and we are at work on future projects. I place his name on the dedication page of this book with gratitude and honour.

Paul is, quite simply, the ideal editor - earnest and swift to respond, invariably encouraging and sympathetic, good-humoured and loyal. Widely respected for his unerring literary sensibility, he has been a precious friend to me over these many years. I am grateful to him; to his wife, Marianne Velmans; and to his entire family, for all they mean to me. It remains only for me to state, with utmost certainty, that Alan would have admired and loved Paul Sidey, too.

*D.S.*  
*Christmas 2006*

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# 1

## *'Hug and Kiss Me, Please'*

ALMOST PRECISELY EQUIDISTANT from the North and Irish Seas and from Scotland and the Channel, the county of Derbyshire features some of the most varied topography in England. The mountains of the High Peak overlook rich pastureland in one direction and austere moors in another, while at some points inhospitable cliffs disturb the tranquillity of a chocolate-box panorama. For centuries, Derbyshire has offered travellers constant surprises: views and vistas shift and change, even along a mile or two of one's journey.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the county census listed 325,000 citizens. Most men worked in coal mines, on farms or in foundries, while women were domestics, cotton spinners or dressmakers. Set apart by vast tracts of land from the modest cottages of ordinary folk stood Derbyshire's great historic houses, dominating the scenery and reminding everyone of the enduring wealth of the aristocracy: Chatsworth House, residence of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, with its splendid grounds planned by Capability Brown; and Kedleston Hall, Haddon and Sutton Scarsdale. During the twilight of the Victorian era, the pace and tone of life in Derbyshire had little of the rush and clatter of London, 130 miles to the south. But change was imminent, and soon a new company, Rolls-Royce Ltd, chose Derbyshire as the site of its large first factory.



In 1895, twenty-four-year-old Arthur Bates was working as a tram supervisor in Derby, the county's primary city. The job paid a decent wage, but he derived greater satisfaction from his off-hour diversions - practising the cello, for which he had real talent, and refining his skills as a gifted oil painter and watercolourist. An imposing, attractive young man, Arthur conducted an amateur orchestra at a local Methodist church, and there he met Alice Scattergood, a dressmaker and part-time landlady. They were married after a proper courtship and had two children, Harold and Edith. Everyone was delighted when Harold replicated his father's aptitude for the cello and attended London's Royal College of Music, where he won the prestigious Scholefield Prize for performance on a stringed instrument. Edith studied voice and became an admired singer.

Mr and Mrs Bates predicted a significant career for Harold as a cellist, but this was not to be. He never took to the pace of London, nor was he keen on travelling with orchestras in the provinces. Instead, he returned to Derby, where he restricted his performances to local concerts, gave private music lessons during evenings and weekends, and, for his living, took a job as an insurance salesman. Harold did join the Derby Light Orchestra under the celebrated conductor John Pritchard, and orchestras in Birmingham and several Midland towns occasionally invited him to play with them as a soloist; otherwise he was, as Pritchard said, a flower in the wilderness.

In 1932, while he was an assistant supervisor for the Refuge Assurance Company, Harold met a lively young Derby woman named Florence Wheatcroft, who always preferred to be known by her middle name, Mary; she not only shared his love of music, she was an accomplished pianist.

Born in 1904, Mary was the daughter of Edward James Wheatcroft, a devout Baptist and sometime lay preacher

who incurred the disapproval of his abstinent church brethren by holding the position of chief accountant at Worthington's Brewery in Derby. Edward's wife, the former Mary Ann 'Polly' Hands, was a dutiful soul, but she developed a mode of remarkably eccentric and even outrageous behaviour. Her husband and children were accustomed to her habit of hiding behind doors and yodelling loudly for the benefit of family and visitors. She also blithely purloined the clothing of guests and occasional lodgers, and, thus freshly attired, made a grand descent on the family staircase.

Edward and Polly had three children: William, a talented draughtsman and illustrator; Eddy, an amateur actor and musician who sometimes appeared in local repertory theatre productions; and Florence Mary. The girl was much adored by her parents and brothers, and she loved being the centre of attention - a trait, her own children recalled, that never faded with time. As a teenager, she was an avid reader and theatregoer, and at school she learned elocution, deportment, good manners and the home-making arts.

But by her early twenties, Mary was alone in the world: her parents had died, her beloved brother William had been killed in the World War, and Eddy was working in France. Forced to sell the family home and its contents, she was for a time quite desolate. Nevertheless, Mary had admirable resilience, and her wit, strength, humour and prettiness guaranteed a healthy social life; she also impressed others with her lively intelligence, her romantic temperament and her love of a good time. But Mary went in for none of her mother's antics. She was, on the contrary, a model of proper decorum and impeccable manners - qualities which, along with her love of music, endeared her to Harold Bates. Like him, Mary had studied theory and practice, and she received an honours certificate in piano in 1925.

Harold and Mary were married in a local Baptist church on 13 April 1933. Their home was at 3 Derwent Avenue, Allestree, then being developed as a suburban village within Derby's city limits. Notable for its scenic open parklands, Allestree's features included a lake, cool forests, verdant roadside fields thick with wild flowers and a profusion of silver birches. At a nursing home in this picturesque village, on 17 February 1934, Mary bore the first of their sons, christened Alan Arthur. Soon afterwards the family moved to 105 Western Road, Mickleover. Later, Harold and Mary had two more boys: Martin Edward was born on 28 March 1939 and John Roy Adrian on 20 August 1945.

Harold Bates was a handsome, deeply emotional man and a devoted father. 'You always knew<sup>2</sup> where you stood with him,' said Alan. 'Behind a certain outward bluster and authority, there was a glint in his eye, and you knew there was humour.' Occasionally, Harold could be irritable and short-tempered, perhaps because he felt some remorse for not pursuing the career in music for which he had received first-rate training and had shown such promise. 'I think', Martin said years later, 'that he sometimes wished he had gone for greater recognition.'

'Your father is a home bird and wants to stay in Derby,' Mary often lamented to her sons, making no secret of her yearning for travel and excitement. 'But what is he going to achieve in Derby?' She thought it a pity that her husband rejected invitations for them to give dual cello-piano recitals in England and abroad. Later, the great John Barbirolli offered Harold the opportunity of a position as cellist with the Hallé Orchestra, but he politely declined, citing his job as an insurance salesman - which, he said, offered steadier employment than that of a seasonal travelling musician. 'I think he could have been<sup>3</sup> something, but he didn't push hard enough,' according to Alan.

‘Dad was always worried about money,’ Martin added, ‘and he was not ambitious or adventurous, nor would he promote himself. He must have had an inner assurance about his music, but he had a general lack of security and confidence – there was a kind of timidity about him. There he was, a brilliant cellist who had once studied in London and then played in regional engagements, and he settled into a humdrum career as an insurance salesman. But he stuck it out for the sake of his family.’

As for Mary, she was a proud, genteel woman who insisted that her sons speak and act politely, demonstrate good manners and proper diction, and always consider the feelings of others. These were, of course, fine qualities so far as they went, but there can be disadvantages in placing too much stress on gracious altruism: a certain self-effacement, along with passivity and a habit of indecision. These did not combine to make for weakness in Alan, Martin or John, but as boys, they evidently had to work hard to assert themselves, to establish their independence and individuality. Still, if there was a predominant characteristic in the Bates family, it may have been that of goodwill – the cultivation of genuine interest in others, an astuteness of judgement and compassion for the problems of others.

Mary was determined to enjoy life and she encouraged the same attitude in her sons, spurring on all their interests, especially in aesthetic and cultural subjects. She loved anything to do with music and theatre; she played tennis into her sixties and the piano right up to her death at ninety-four. An incorrigible flirt, she often giggled like a school-girl. ‘She said she didn’t<sup>4</sup> know when she was born, which of course wasn’t true,’ recalled Alan’s son, Benedick. ‘It was a source of some family amusement that she never revealed her age and she always tried to ignore her birthday. But she was a woman of high ideals, and she saw to it that her family was exposed to a highly cultivated life.’

She could be very grand, but she was also the rock of the family.'

Perhaps because of the loss of her family and the concomitant period of loneliness in her youth, it was as if Mary (in Martin's words) 'threw a fortress around her family once she was happily married. She gradually became more possessive and defensive of her sons as the years went by, and this could be damaging - for example, many of our girlfriends and even our wives had a difficult time. She was of course intensely loyal to her husband and family, and there was always a very special relationship with Alan. But her early training had emphasised all the social graces necessary for her to take her place as the charming and dutiful wife of a professionally successful gentleman.' In this aspiration she was disappointed.

Hence, while Harold was frustrated artistically, Mary felt hindered socially. Forced to remain at home and to abandon her desire for more frequent travel, she became, as if by default, possessive and extravagantly doting. 'Sometimes we felt suffocated,' Martin recalled, 'and our girlfriends felt shut out if, in her eyes, they did not match up to her expectations.' Fearful of losing others as she had lost her own family, Mary often risked alienating those she most loved.

Year-round, Allestree was very much a paradise for active children, and so it was remembered by Alan and his boyhood chums. They built tree houses, played football and fixed up a makeshift raft, which promptly sank in the lake. 'We sent Alan out<sup>5</sup> to test it,' recalled Peter Barry, a boyhood friend, 'and he was soon a foot under water.'

Most of these after-school activities earned the disapproval of Mary, who much preferred that Alan and Martin learn to play piano. But this notion met with boyish resistance, and off they went to lark about with their mates. 'She shuddered<sup>6</sup> at the way Alan lived his life,' according to another childhood chum, John Ash. 'To us, it was just

boyish pranks, but she thought we were leading him astray. She also pulled us up about our grammar – she seemed determined to bring Alan up as a gentleman.’ In fact, Mary corrected Alan’s speech even more than she enjoined music lessons. As she had learned at a school for young gentlewomen, proper diction signalled good breeding, which (it was implied) was almost a religious virtue.

Shy and affectionate, and with a winning smile even as a boy, Alan nevertheless had a naughty side to his nature. He and a few friends were involved in minor shoplifting, purloining and then exchanging among themselves some of their parents’ possessions (a wristwatch or two); they smoked on the sly; and they dared pranks that were sometimes dangerous. No matter that Mary had to school and scold him, she never wavered in the special bond she felt for her eldest son.

In 1942, the family moved from Western Road back to Derwent Avenue. England was enduring the deprivations of World War II, and the Bates family shared the general austerities: food, paper and fuel, among other necessities, were severely limited. ‘I remember the strictness,<sup>7</sup> the rations,’ Alan recalled years later, ‘but music was played a great deal’ – and that brought a certain serenity despite the grim daily news.

In 1942, Mary’s predilection for good diction and fine oral communication inspired her to enrol eight-year-old Alan in the Herbert Strutt School, a respected academy with an admirable tradition of speech and drama education. Located in the nearby town of Belper, the building resembled a Tudor manor house where classes were small, and the students were encouraged to pursue artistic as well as athletic pastimes. Mary also took a special interest in Alan’s music education – a subject taught by the petite but formidable Miss Rudd, who terrified the children into submission.

According to another teacher, Miss Harris, Alan was 'very quiet,<sup>8</sup> almost retiring'. Such apparent diffidence faded when, as so often, his refined diction made him the obvious choice to read lessons or to recite a poem before the entire school at assemblies. 'At first, I had a huge resistance to speaking in public at grammar school. I would panic and withdraw from it. Then I suddenly reversed - I just jumped and couldn't wait to do it.' Later, he tried to analyse this shift in feeling, 'but I've never been able to.'

During that first year at Strutt, Alan developed a lifelong habit of sending letters and notes to his family. At Christmas 1942, for example, he took up his pen and wrote separate holiday greetings for his mother and father, who lived no further from him than the next room.

Dear daddy

I hope you like your card and all the other presents that you have. I just forget what exact day I did the card but I know it was a few days before. Do you like it? My writing I mean. I gave Mummy a note like this one to. When you have read the letter hug me and kiss me please? I am so sorry I can't think of anything else to tell you but in the next letter I write to you I will do. Good-by.

Love from Alan and Martin to daddy.

Dear Mummy

I hope you had a very nice Christmas and I wish you a happy new year. My writing is very small but still I can't help that I am writing very quickly. I did not fill my pen so I have to keep dipping it in the ink pot but now I have finished talking about ink pots. Do you like my writing if you do tell me so hug me and kiss me please. I mean when you have read the letter. I know it is very nice to say good-by.

Love from Alan

Except for public speaking and letter writing, he had little interest in school. 'I wasn't academic<sup>9</sup> at all - not before my late twenties did I ever really like the idea of actually studying.' He managed mostly pass grades, although not in mathematics, which seemed especially useless to his boyish judgement.

'It was not an unhappy childhood,'<sup>10</sup> Alan reflected later,

but I reacted very strongly against my middle-class environment. I had to get away from it ... There is something about the atmosphere of suburbia that I find stifling and inhibiting ... [and] I felt frustrated ... Everyone lived with the lid on ... and there was a tremendous sense of there not being much to do. A night designated for going into town for fish and chips and hoping the fairground was open - that was about it.

There was, however, significant diversion. His mother, who fancied anything dramatic, exotic or sentimental, routinely took Alan to amateur theatricals and to movies appropriate for a boy of his age. By the time of his eleventh birthday, in 1945, he was addicted to the cinema. That summer, three films were on in Derby - a George Formby comedy; one of the *Tarzan* series; and *Thunderhead, Son of Flicka*. 'I want to see them all!' he wrote in a note to his mother and, that season, he began to keep a diary of the films he saw, rating them and the actors with one to five stars. His list of favourite titles over the next three years indicates not the typical childhood fare but adult dramas remarkably sophisticated for a boy between eleven and fourteen: *Great Expectations*, *Odd Man Out*, *Uncle Silas*, *Blanche Fury*, *London Belongs to Me*, *Good Time Girl*, *Desire Me* and Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, which he saw no fewer than three times when he was fourteen.



Recalling his visits with his mother to plays at the Derby Little Theatre, Alan said that he ‘became infatuated<sup>11</sup> – I *had* to go every week.’ More to the point, he soon announced, ‘I can do what we’ve seen<sup>12</sup> on that stage tonight!’ As he later added, ‘I’d found<sup>13</sup> what I wanted to do, and what I thought I could do. It just hit me, and then it became an absolute obsession. I didn’t care about anything else.’ He was especially impressed when he saw his Uncle Eddy Wheatcroft perform in an amateur production of *The Seagull*.

Martin remembered going to Alan’s ‘secret acting place – a clearing in the nearby woods, where he enacted simple scenes, using me as his “foil” while he practised entrances, exits and quick exchanges on things like attack, alarm and escape. If I made fun or expressed impatience, he became quite cross.’

When Alan told Harold and Mary that he wanted to be an actor, ‘they took it to be<sup>14</sup> a childhood whim and humoured me, thinking it would pass as I grew older’. Still, they permitted him to appear in the non-speaking part of Mercutio’s page, in six performances of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Railway Institute in February 1948, an offering of the British Empire Shakespeare Society in Derby, which had been operating almost every year since 1909. This role, not mentioned in character lists of Shakespeare’s plays, was a walk-on, along with the masquers, the citizens of Verona and other supernumeraries; in the text, the page is singularised only when Mercutio is dying: ‘Where is my page? Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.’ Exit the page.

Participation, even with no lines to speak, must have been exhilarating for a stage-struck fourteen-year-old, and Mary saw an advantage to her son’s youthful enthusiasm. If, as he said, Alan was committed to the idea of acting, then he ought to enrol in voice and diction lessons – a social advantage, she reasoned, no matter his professional future. Harold at once arranged for Alan to study with a

respected and charismatic teacher named Claude W. Gibson. After listening to the boy read, Gibson recognised an inchoate talent and, potentially, an impressive voice; he also observed the boy's natural charm and engaging appearance.

That autumn, Alan joined a group of students travelling to Stratford for a performance of Shakespeare's *King John*, a production that featured, among other players, Paul Scofield, Claire Bloom, Clifford Williams, Paul Hardwick, Esmond Knight, Robert Helpmann and Anthony Quayle. From that evening, Alan told his parents, his future was fixed and firm - and he asked to have more tutorials with Claude Gibson. 'He really knew<sup>15</sup> how to draw something out of you,' Alan recalled. 'He got me to really articulate and taught me to breathe properly.'

But Harold and Mary had growing reservations about Alan's theatrical aspirations and so approached one of his teachers at the Strutt School. 'His mother and father<sup>16</sup> came to a parents' evening,' recalled Miss Harris. 'They were worried because they thought there was no money in a theatre career,' although they evidently saw no contradiction in having encouraged a musical one. Together, the teacher and the parents devised a plan, which they presented to Alan: 'They filled me with all the warnings, saying, "If you haven't succeeded by the time you're twenty-six, then think about something else."'

Still, Mary could not bear to disappoint her eldest son. She knew George Revill, a producer at the Derby Shakespeare Society, and in February 1949 Alan appeared with the company again - this time in a speaking role as Prince Arthur, in six performances of *King John*, which he had read and studied carefully since his visit to Stratford. The highlight of his performance was the long fourth-act dialogue between Arthur and the henchman sent to blind him. The scene presents a challenge even to a seasoned actor, for the frightened boy must dissuade his would-be

torturer by a combination of sincere affection and frank terror:

If heaven be pleased that you must use me ill,  
Why then you must. Will you put out mine eyes?  
These eyes that never did nor never shall  
So much as frown on you?

'I was smashing,'<sup>17</sup> Alan recalled proudly, 'even though I forgot to take off my wristwatch while I was playing a thirteenth-century prince.'

Douglas Marsden, who co-produced the play with Revill, had the task of preparing younger cast members, 'but Alan was obviously<sup>18</sup> gifted and needed little coaching,' he recalled. A local newspaper critic agreed: 'Arthur, the boy prince<sup>19</sup> was played by A. Bates, whose manner, particularly in the famous scene with Hubert, the gaoler who is to put out his eyes, was natural and very moving.' Impressed with Alan's preparation and intensity, the producers then cast him, in February 1950, as Edward, Prince of Wales, in *Richard III*, and to similarly good effect. Moreover, that spring he won an honour certificate in a local verse-speaking competition. With that, Alan, who openly complained to friends and family that he was supremely bored at the Strutt School, boldly wrote to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, asking for information and the requirements for acceptance. 'I was attracted<sup>20</sup> to the glamour and the famous people,' he admitted later.

The allure of fame and the appeal of beautiful actors were much trumpeted by a young actor and soon to be director named John Dexter, who was nine years older than Alan; he was then working in and around Derby, and he was not at all shy about being homosexual. 'Alan formed a friendship with John Dexter that my father was not happy about,' recalled Martin, 'and he gave Alan a lecture.' Harold's objection could not have concerned matters

theatrical but rather the nature of the relationship between twenty-four-year-old Dexter and fifteen-year-old Alan – or perhaps what Harold judged it to be. But Harold's instructions had to be softened, for Dexter's father was a good friend who also performed in the Derby Orchestra.

Meanwhile, Alan continued to study with Gibson, who lived in a rambling, book-strewn Victorian house in Derby. Because the elocution lessons were conducted under the formal aegis of the government, Gibson was required to report on his students' progress, grading them on enunciation, sight-reading and voice control. To pass with distinction, students had to attain at least 130 out of a possible 150 points; Alan earned 140.

Appropriately, he had prepared Hamlet's injunction to actors:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and – as I may say – whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness.

By the end of that year, Gibson reported that Alan had recited verse 'with considerable lyric understanding'<sup>21</sup> and rated his speech from *Julius Caesar* as 'remarkable for its insight and dramatic intensity'.

When the teacher learned of his student's desire to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art at the age of seventeen, he wrote a cautionary letter to Mary:

Alan told me<sup>22</sup> about the suggestion [perhaps made by Marsden or Revill] that he should take the RADA audition at the end of December. It is necessary to

realise that RADA is no ordinary dramatic school for bright boys and girls, but the leading dramatic school in England, in which places are sought from literally all over the English-speaking world: there were many Americans there when Joy [his daughter] was there. All ages under 30 were represented, but anyone younger than 18, unless there is unusual brilliance, promise and a mature outlook and appearance, is not welcome.

If Alan were successful too early in gaining admittance - and the competition is extremely keen for the relatively few places - he might well regret it later. To find oneself younger than the average may not be a pleasant experience. I feel one would enjoy life at RADA far more at 19-20 than at 17-18. RADA is looked on as the university of the stage, and I feel sure that the preference is for an older type already very well equipped. Whereas in the old days a certain standard of attainment was required for admittance, it is now a question of competition and many find themselves unable to get to RADA.

Time, I feel, is all on Alan's side, and men, in any case, can always afford to wait. For his own sake, I should advise him not to hurry. My own opinion is that however much Alan dislikes school, he should [continue with his studies] - his knowledge would become wide, pass or fail, and his mental outlook would be broader. And he would have advanced to a much higher standard in his dramatic work. At present, although most promising in his work, he has not and will not have for some time independent command of his medium. This is not intended or expected at this intermediate stage of his training.

Then, too, staying longer at school would mean less difficulty over a grant. I do not think the County authorities would be very generous with a grant if in one of their schools a boy wished to leave with a School

Certificate only, especially if the grant were to subsidise a boy in attempting a career of little value to the education authorities.

I fear Alan won't like this advice. Forgive me for giving you and Mr Bates so much to read ...

Yours very sincerely,  
C. W. Gibson

Not long after Mary and Harold received this letter, Alan had yet another triumph at school - as Jack, in a school production of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 'Alan Bates was not only an extremely able player himself,' wrote a Belper critic, 'but one also who, by his own acting, encouraged and stimulated the rest of the cast to give a performance to match his own.' This was the first mention of a generous trait regularly praised by colleagues throughout his lifetime: Alan regarded himself as a member of an ensemble - he was never a performer fixated merely on burnishing his own star.

Gibson's caveats notwithstanding, Alan begged to be allowed to pursue his application to RADA; finally his parents consented and, after a time, even Gibson agreed to write on his behalf. But Alan had perhaps not fully considered the matter of tuition, which was several thousand pounds per annum. Financial support for arts students was extremely difficult to obtain during post-war austerities, and such a sum was beyond his father's capacity.

Two acquaintances came to the rescue - John Dexter's influential father and an officer for the Derbyshire County Council's Education Department. They championed Alan's petition and the awards committee provided a generous grant. The course of study at RADA normally extended for two years, but the money was initially offered only for the first. After that, Alan would be eighteen, and it would be time to fulfil his obligation of military service; support for