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# brian blessed

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## Sunday Herald, The, Nov 14, 1999 by Graeme Virtue

The pithy bearded thesp and all-round action man tells Graeme Virtue why he very nearly gave Death a punch in the bloody chopsHello, Brian?

Who's that?

It's the Sunday Herald.

(Laughs) It's nice to talk to you. It's alright, I'm just a bit potty this morning, lots of dogs around me and I'm giving people lots of conundrums and puzzles and things. I'm doing Call My Bluff, and I'm saying am I telling the truth? And I kid everybody.

Em, is this a convenient time?

Absolutely marvellous. Fire away.

Where are you?

I'm at home in Bagshot. We've got about 2000 animals here, it's an animal sanctuary and I've got all the dogs out of my room at the moment because they make such a noise. I love my study because it's full of objects from my expeditions and I can relax in it. It's a haven.

Bagshot sounds like something from Lord of the Rings.

It's about seven acres in a Natural Trust property, and it's a marvellous place. We have a simple cottage which is quite small, but I have a large study which is just great. I can go back into my egg, as you might say, and just be myself in the quiet. I'm always known as a larger-than-life guy who can be quite noisy but Ken Branagh surprised everyone the other day by saying, my best friend's Brian Blessed. Why's that, asked the interviewer. And he said, well, he's the quietest, stillest man I've ever met. And the interviewer said, are we talking about the same man? But I would say most of my life I've loved silence, stillness and quiet.

Can't be that quiet in Bagshot with all those animals around.

They're very demanding, but they're lovely, natural sounds. Within all the noise, I'd say there is a silence.

You've written a book about an expedition to South America, but in it you actually talk quite a lot about your upbringing.

It's extraordinary, I never anticipated actually describing my childhood and parts of my life, but suddenly you find you can't separate it from the adventure. Other people write things like I went to Everest or I went to the North Pole, and I think well, that's a bit narrow, really. Why are you going there? I hate chats about base camp, I find that very boring.

The trip to South America was inspired by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, right?

Absolutely. The wooden radio we had in our house during the war was the centre of our universe. When the BBC did *War Of The Worlds*, it was as the book, with incredible sounds. You could hear those infernal machines moving. And when they did *The Lost World*, it was simply sensational. I was gripped. I heard it for the first time when I was seven. And then they repeated it about a year later in the afternoons and it clashed with my school times. It meant I would be 20 minutes late, and you couldn't be twenty minutes late at my school. And I was caned severely, sometimes I would be caned ten times in a session to see if it would break me. And one day Mr Brown, the master, asked, why do keep being late, Blessed? And I said, because I listen to *The Lost World*, sir. I think it's worth getting caned for. And Mr Brown was amazingly apologetic when he found out.

Looking at the photos of you as a boy, it's weird seeing you without a beard.

Well, I've had my beard since about 1970. I took it off for Augustus Caesar in *I, Claudius* and I took it off for Tom Jones, but otherwise people want the beard. And it does feel like me. I do feel I am a bearded man, if you know what I mean.

You're probably best known for your many acting roles.

But I've become an explorer. Half of my life is acting and the other half is exploration. When I look back at my childhood, I realise my first love was always adventure. Acting is really rolling up the mirror to life, and it's a great art and a brave art, but of course exploration is life. But since I was a child, I've had a terrible yearning for adventure. And you can't call adventure adventure unless it's tinged with danger. Mankind has a need for monsters, we need to sweat. It's interesting looking at modern people putting jewellery through their nose or in their ears, a kind of total tribal thing. People want to sweat, they want to get up a hill, they want to get into a jungle.

But what about the danger?

What I experienced at 28,000 feet, when I was on Everest on my own without external oxygen, I mean, you have one foot in life and one in death. It's very fluid in the stratosphere up there, when all your muscles have wasted away, and your kidneys are beginning to fail and the X-factor comes into being and you start to connect to something else that sustains and holds you that you don't ordinarily feel in life and you begin to feel it up there. It's a very, very rarefied and refined experience. And you realise that death is not the last word, you realise that life is. And as Donne says, Death, thou shalt die. Death doesn't exist. But what irritates me is that it's going to stop my physical body and I hate being defenceless. I don't mind as much if I can defend myself.

During the expedition, your Cessna went down over the jungle. How did you feel?

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