

JUST SECONDS FROM DEATH... AND THE DRAMA WAS REAL

*The German put his pistol against the young airman's head and his finger tightened on the trigger. Then an RAF officer coolly intervened and Roy Dotrice (Father in TV's *Beauty and the Beast*) survived to make his acting debut behind a prison camp's barbed wire. Frank Durham reports.*

THE German officer, his face white with fury, held a pistol to the head of the young RAF sergeant. As his finger tightened on the trigger, an English voice said coolly: "I think it would be rather a bad idea to shoot him."

The German turned to face the man who had spoken, the camp's senior officer — and he lowered the gun. The life of Roy Dotrice, a prisoner of war at the incredible age of 15, had been spared.

Today, 63-year-old Roy, who plays Father in *Beauty And The Beast*, said: "I have never told anybody about this before. I was just seconds away from oblivion."

Roy joined the RAF at 14 by lying about his age. He became an air gunner and was flying combat missions in heavy bombers when most boys are still collecting conkers.

His plane was shot down and Roy survived being three days adrift in a dinghy in the North Sea. He ended up behind barbed wire... only to nearly lose his life by jeering at a German officer.

Eating a bread and cheese lunch at his Hollywood apartment, Roy said: "It was a strange experience, and there was a bizarre sequel. At the time, I was in a prison camp in Lithuania. We had spent the whole winter digging a wonderful escape tunnel.

"The Germans always put these camps at places where there was sandy soil, so that tunnels would collapse easily. When they suspected we were digging one, and estimated that it might have nearly reached the wire, they would drive a steamroller around the camp's perimeter.

"And this is just what they did on this particular day. The steamroller ended up stuck down our tunnel. We had to gain time so that we could pull out the men who were tunnelling. So three of us were appointed to distract the Germans by yelling derision at them.

"I was doing all these stupid things and shouting, 'Yah! Boo! Sucks!' when this German officer came towards me. He was so annoyed that he grabbed me by the lapels and slung me against the wall of a latrine.

"Then he took out his pistol and was about to shoot me. That was when our commanding officer, a chap called Dixie Dean, came along and persuaded him not to kill me."

Roy chuckled and went on: "That night I was playing a girl, in the lead part of a play called *The Rotters*. Since I hadn't even started to shave, I was roped into playing the female roles.

"There I was on stage in nylons and suspenders. A group of Germans came to see

the show. And, afterwards, they came on stage. I recognised one of them as being the guy who was going to shoot me earlier in the day.

"But this time, because I was now dressed as a female, he was trying to paw me. I thought to myself, 'This is very strange, mate. A couple of hours ago you were going to shoot me. Now you're trying to come on to me.'"

Ironically, Roy is grateful he was shot down. Not only did it teach him to practise the art of his two great loves — acting and baseball — but it saved his life. He explained: "There was no other way I would have survived the war.

"The average life of a rear air-gunner in those days was just eight flying hours. So I was extremely lucky that flak hit me that day in 1942. And I celebrated my 16th birthday in a prison camp."

Roy began the war adventurously, too. He recalled: "In 1940, on the third night of the German occupation of Guernsey, a group of five of us schoolboys decided to try to escape to England. We took a little boat and spent three days getting to Plymouth.

"After being in England a week or two, I tried to join the RAF, telling them that I was 18. They accepted me, although I don't know whether they believed me or not. But they were desperate for men at the time.

"I qualified as an air-gunner. I was a hopeless marksman but, on the final test, I got more than a little help from the pilot who was flying me. This chap, who was Chinese, flew so near to the target which was being towed by another plane, that the barrels of my guns were almost touching it.

"So I flew for two years. I was with a squadron led by Wing Commander Guy Gibson.

"He later flew on the famous raid that breached two enemy dams with 'bouncing bombs'. I was shot down on a stupid little mission the Wing Commander laughingly called a nursery trip. A couple of German battleships called the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau had dashed down the English Channel under cover of fog and were in Kiel harbour.

"The British wanted to make sure these ships didn't come out and start preying on our Atlantic shipping. Three aircraft, including mine, were sent off to drop 2000lb mines at the entrance to Kiel harbour."

Roy, the distinguished actor, paused to sip a glass of champagne. The Californian sun shone warmly through the window. But, in his imagination, he was in the rear turret of a bomber flying the skies of wartime Europe.



ABOVE: Roy Dotrice as Father in *Beauty and the Beast*. The show plays to an audience of 14 million in a single night.

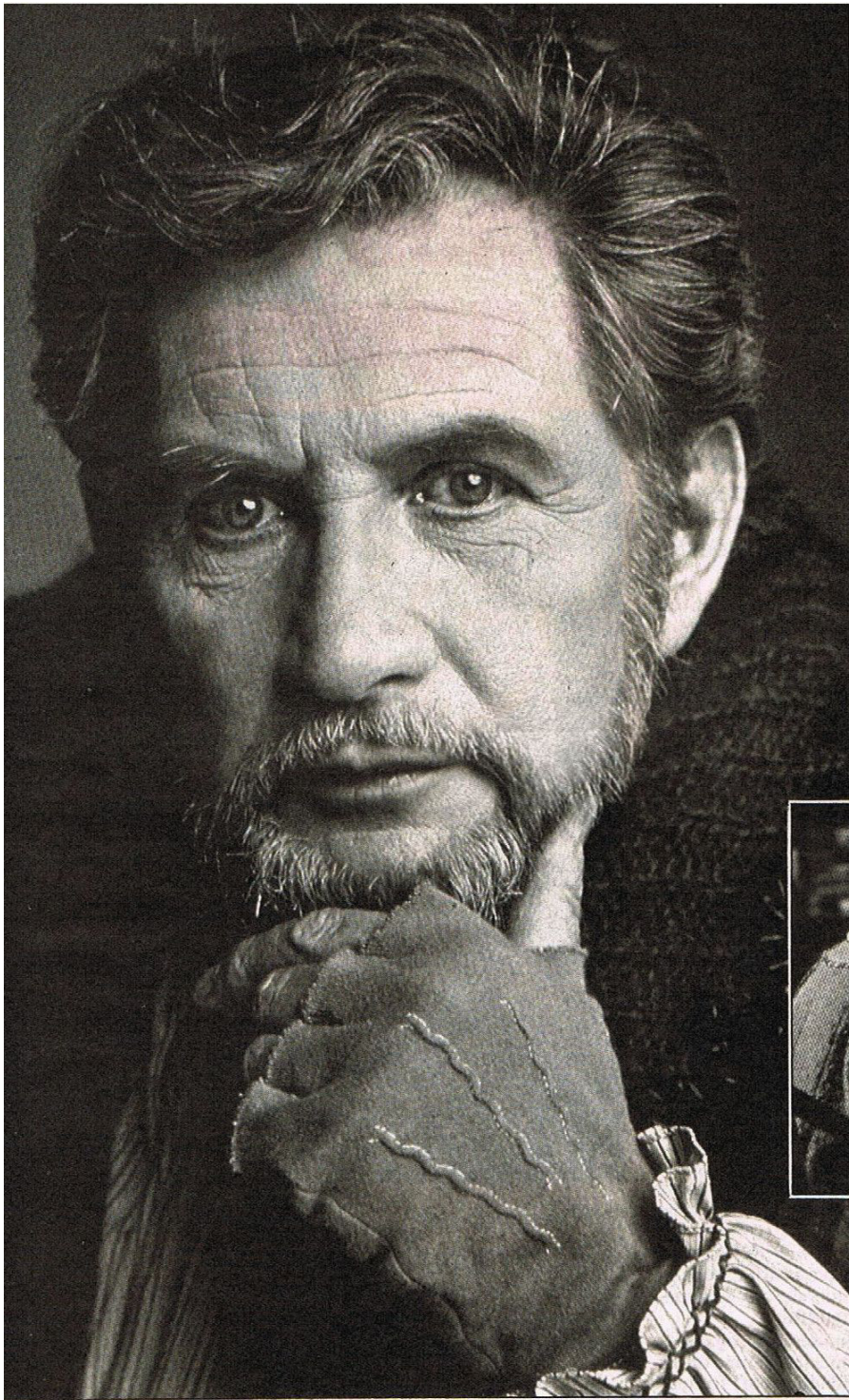
RIGHT: "For some time I played solely female roles. Thank God I later progressed to male characters."

FAR RIGHT: With Ron Perlman in a scene from *Beauty and the Beast*.

He went on: "I was flying in a bomber called a Manchester. My rear gun turret was not a good position because that aircraft had a nasty fault — the tail used to fall off without warning.

"Being on night raids was a frightening experience. And I was such a bad flyer, as I suffered from air sickness all the time. When I was up in that gun turret I felt so ill I used to desperately pray that some German night fighter would come along, shoot us down and put me out of my agony.

"On this last mission — my third — it was a moonlit night. We were flying across the



Lithuania. The experience was to dramatically change his life. He said: "When I was in Stalag Luft 3, where they made a dramatic escape using a gymnasium wooden horse, I was asked to play the fairy godmother in the pantomime *Cinderella*."

"I was very flattered but very shy. But I accepted the part... the first I ever played. For some time after that, because of my obvious youth, I played solely female roles. Thank God I later progressed to male characters."

"And I learned from Canadian and American prisoners how to pitch baseball. I've been hooked on the game ever since."

"After the war I was with the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon. It had always been a cricket stronghold, but I introduced baseball there."

"My all-star team included singer Paul Robeson, Sam Wanamaker, Sir Laurence Olivier, Peter O'Toole and Albert Finney. Charles Laughton was an umpire and, when he said you were out, you didn't argue."

When the war ended, Roy studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Then he spent 13 years playing provincial theatres with Frank H. Fontesque's Famous Players before joining the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Roy has been married to actress Kay New-



man for 43 years and has three actress daughters. Michelle is married to *Equalizer* Edward Woodward and was Michael Crawford's TV wife in *Some Mothers Do Have 'Em*. Karen was a child actress and appeared in *Mary Poppins*. And Yvette was in the British TV series *Fox*.

And the boy who made his debut as a prison camp fairy godmother has gone on to a glittering career on stage, in films and on television. Roy was Mozart's father in *Amadeus*, received a Tony nomination for the Broadway production of *A Life*, and is currently starring in the *Guinness Book of Records*. This is for clocking up 1700 performances throughout the world for his one-man show *Brief Lives*.

Roy told me wryly: "In *Brief Lives*, I played to some three million people over eight years. On one night of *Beauty And the Beast* we have an audience of 14 million."

But he loves playing Father to all of them. ●

North Sea at just 45 feet [15 metres]. When we reached bits of land, we would hop over the trees and things. Then we flew over a little island and an anti-aircraft battery hit our port wing, blowing it away.

"We crashed into the sea. All the crew survived, but some of them were badly knocked about. After floating around in a rubber dinghy for three days, we spotted this coastline and paddled towards it."

"We landed and picked our way carefully up the beach in case it was mined. We came to a dike and peered over the top. What we saw was like a picture postcard of Holland.

There were windmills, tulip beds and little thatched cottages."

Roy laughed as he went on: "We thought, 'It's Holland. We'll find the local priest, contact the underground resistance and they'll get us home in a couple of days'."

"So we went marching boldly up to the door of a little cottage and knocked on it. Out came a German submarine commander! That's how good our navigator was. The German said words to the effect of, 'For you ze voor iss over'."

Roy spent the next three-and-a-half years in prison camps in Germany, Poland and