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“Six by Agatha”

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POIROT SPEAKS OUT

After 20 years and more than 60 episodes, David Suchet nears his goal of acting every Hercule Poirot plot by Agatha Christie. He talks about this and more.

It's been two decades since David Suchet put on a fake mustache, a pair of spats, and a Belgian-French accent to assume the identity of Hercule Poirot, the world's greatest detective in the classic mysteries by Agatha Christie. Sixty-plus episodes later he is still cracking cases with his "little grey cells." As an actor, Suchet has had a distinguished career before and during the long-running Poirot series, playing the likes of Sigmund Freud, movie mogul Louis B. Mayer, and Dracula-hunter Van Helsing, not to mention numerous Shakespearean and other stage, movie, and TV roles. He recently answered questions from London, where he was memorizing lines for *Poirot* episode number 62.

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Q: I went back and looked at *The Adventure of the Clapham Cook*, which is the first Poirot mystery you did, and Poirot seems to have sprung fully formed from your acting psyche. He is exactly the same person as in your most recent productions. But, I wonder, have you added little touches to his personality to refine him over the years?

A: You have to remember that Agatha Christie never anticipated that Poirot would be such a success. He became a national figure overnight, rather like Harry Potter today. She continued writing him, but she never changed him. She would change little things: the stripes of his trousers became a millimeter wider, and in one story he progressed to wearing a wrist watch, instead of a fob watch. But she never actually physically aged him until the final novel, *The Curtain*, where we see him as a wizened old man. What Agatha Christie does is she gradually reveals his darker, more pensive side. One is aware, as her books progress, that he is genuinely lonely and wished he had married. What I've tried to do in about the last five years or so, is to introduce very gradually this darker, more pensive side. That rather goes, also, with the natural aging of myself, which I can't stop.

Q: Now that you're closer in age to Poirot's presumed real age, has that given you new insights into his character?

A: He's more dug-in than I ever imagined him to be. Although I have been Poirot for a very long time, I was a much younger man when I started. I think I've made him more seated now. If I look at the very early episodes, I find him more sprightly then, because it was me as a younger man.

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Q: Have you become more like him over the years?

A: No, I don't think I've become more like him. By the time I started filming twenty years ago, I had spent so many months researching him that I was as near to him as I could possibly get. Where I've been fortunate is that Poirot is such an interesting character. He's not me; he doesn't have my voice; I'm not his shape; we live totally different lives; and I'm a totally different man, which means that I can have a fully fledged career outside of Poirot. I don't need Poirot to have a career, because I started becoming a professional actor in 1969, and I started doing Poirot in 1988.

Q: When you started playing Poirot, did you ever envision that it would become such a major part of your life?

A: No, in fact, I had an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* here in England before the first episode. I remember telling the journalist that a lot of people might find my interpretation rather dull after such great Poirot performances by Albert Finney and Peter Ustinov. All I did with the role was go back to how the character was written by Agatha Christie, and I didn't turn him into a comedy figure. So I doubted we would do a second season. That was twenty years ago.

Q: Agatha Christie wrote scores of Poirot novels and short stories. How many have you filmed so far?

A: Well, I've done 61, and I think there are ten more to go.

Q: Is it your ambition to do them all?

A: Now that I'm of a certain age, my dream is to leave not only this country and America, but actually the rest of the world with the complete works of that little man, so that anybody may be prompted to go and read the books.

Q: Poirot personifies men's high fashion in Europe in the 1930s. Have you developed a taste for these finer things?

A: Yes, I have. I never really thought about the period before I played Poirot. Now, I have to say that Art Deco and the up-market thirties style, which is Poirot's style, is something I like very much indeed.

Q: I'm curious about spats, which are a Poirot trademark. What in the world are they for?

A: They're extremely useful. Spats were a derivative of the gaiter in the army. They stop water from getting into where the laces tie. They also protect the trouser from rubbing on the shoe, absorbing the shoe polish that would otherwise go on the trouser. Poirot uses spats very much as part of his attire to protect his patent leather shoes.

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Q: I have the impression that his peculiar walk comes from the fact that his shoes are too tight.

A: Well they are. Early on, the producer called us in to test our characters. We were all very pleased with where I had got to with Poirot, but I was not happy about Poirot's walk. The producer said, no, you're walking too much as David Suchet. So I said, let me go back to the books. I don't know whether I had an angel with me, but of all the books I picked up, after about the third one I came across a passage where Agatha Christie writes, "Poirot crossed the lawn with his usual rapid, mincing gait, with his feet tightly and painfully enclosed within his shiny patent leather shoes."

Q: Of course, an important part of your character is your very distinctive voice and accent, which along with everything else hasn't changed since the beginning of the series.

A: Yes. That shouldn't change at all. I spent a couple of months perfecting this voice. Now as you can hear, my voice is quite low. And Poirot's voice, I determined, should be up in his head, because he's been described as a walking brain. There is nothing much of him below the neck. Then I discovered I had a problem. I knew Poirot was Belgian, but everybody he meets thinks he's French. That's the running gag: people think he's French, and he keeps saying, *non*, I am Belgian! So I listened to English-speaking French radio and then I listened to English-speaking Belgian radio to pick up the difference in accents. I also listened to country French. What I've done is a mixture of everything—with an emphasis on French with the odd Belgian twang.

Q: How is your French?

A: I speak enough to get by. I don't speak it like a native.

Q: It must be quite a balancing act to play a character who is ridiculous in the eyes of many, but who is really a deeply serious, authentic person.

A: The trick to that is that the character himself does not know he's like that. It may be commented on by other people, but never by Poirot himself. And that is the clue to keeping it real.

Q: Do you ever have trouble achieving the right balance?

A: Yes, enormous trouble. In fact, part of problem at the moment is that I haven't filmed for over a year, and I'm desperately trying to watch former Poirots that I've made to make sure that I've got the character right again. My wife and I usually watch about twelve hours in preparation.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I have just finished a lovely little film in Canada called *Diverted*. It's a story about the planes that were diverted to Gander, Newfoundland, during 9-11. Then I've just been at the Old Vic Theatre working with Richard Dreyfuss and Kevin Spacey on a new play, which was also great fun. Then I've just finished a presenting job about the Orient Express for ITV to accompany *Murder on the Orient Express* [another Poirot case], which I will be filming later in the year. It's me interviewing the crew, finding out the history of the train, speaking to the passengers, and all that sort of thing. Absolutely fascinating! At the moment you actually catch me learning lines for the next *Poirot*. Tomorrow we have the read through of *The Clocks*, and in a week's time we start shooting the first of the four that I will be doing this year.

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Q: It sounds like you are well on your way to finishing the complete oeuvre.

A: If I'm allowed to I will!

Q: In all of Agatha Christie's mysteries, Poirot and Miss Marple never meet. Have you ever thought about how Poirot would have interacted with Miss Marple if they had been working on the same case?

A: If we would have been on the same case together, of course Marple would not have had a look-in, because remember that Marple is an amateur and Poirot is a professional!

Q: How about if they met socially?

A: Socially, he would find her very charming, I'm sure. They would have discussed various cases. I don't think he would have taken her too seriously, though.

Q: You seem comfortable with the knowledge that you are so closely associated with this character. What would you like people to remember about your work as Hercule Poirot?

A: What I'd like to hear is someone say, if I were to pick up any Poirot book, the man that I was reading about is the man I saw on the screen.

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