

## LATER LIFE STORIES

### THE ACTOR

Wendy Craig, 83

## A Life in Character

BAFTA WINNER WENDY CRAIG DECIDED TO BECOME AN ACTOR WHEN SHE WAS THREE. SHE HAS WORKED ON STAGE AND TELEVISION SINCE THE '60's AND STARRED ALONGSIDE BETTE DAVIS IN THE NANNY. WENDY CURRENTLY PLAYS IN NETFLIX'S *THE WORST WITCH*.



I was born in 1934 in a little mining village called Sacriston, in County Durham.

I was inspired by the idea of acting almost from the time I could think. I saw a pantomime at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle, an amazing building – red plush and gilt and velvet chairs. The curtain went up and I thought, this is what I'm meant to do. My mother had to restrain me from running onto the stage.

At 17, I came down to London to attend the Central School of Drama and then got a repertory job in Ipswich.

I really thought of myself as a dramatic actress, but ended up doing comedy, which I liked much better.

I won the BAFTA for a comedy called *Not in Front of the Children*. I think it was the first for a comedy performance. Then ITV beckoned with *And Mother Makes Three*. It was like a snowball going down a hill. I kept picking up these shows.

I very much enjoyed working on *The Nanny* with Bette Davis. She was a great character. She wore long navy bloomers under her costume and when she was in a jolly mood she'd lift up her skirt and do the can-can. I was called Virginia and I was

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constantly in tears. Every day the call sheet said, "tears for Virgi," in case I couldn't produce any.

Acting has given me great joy. So many people that were lovely to work with: Geoffrey Palmer, Bruce Montague in *Butterflies*, Andrew Hall, Nicholas Lyndhurst. And all the children I've worked with!

I never fall into habits, but I don't think acting has changed. It means getting into the skin of the role you've been given, involving your audience with it, sharing with other

actors. It's always been the same. In the old days, when theatres didn't have sound, you had to really ham it up because it was the only way to get across. I'm doing *The Worst Witch* because I wanted something my grandchildren and great-grandchildren would enjoy, rather than heavy drama. I play Miss Bat, Head of Incantations. I've just got my call; I go to Cheshire tomorrow. There's no pattern, you never know when it's going to happen, but it's lovely to work with children again. I said I would do the next year and the next, because the storylines are moving on all the time. This is the third year. I have the most fulfilling life, doing the work that I love.

The question is not, how do I keep going, but, how would I keep going if I wasn't doing this? Acting is the thing that brings energy into my life. If I'm not working I can get very low, so I'm really happy when I've got a job.

I do a twenty-minute workout every morning, diction and vocal exercises, I keep my weight down. I love chocolate, and I don't drink

alcohol; I can't see the point of it any more. I'm not madly careful. I'm not on one of these diets where they eat cabbage soup. I eat normally but I make sure the portions are not too big.

Perhaps there aren't as many roles now for older people but look at Dame Maggie and Judy Dench. They never stop working, and they're in their eighties. Helen Mirren is in her seventies. There are parts for these wonderful actresses, there are roles to be played. You don't think about their age, you just think they're right for that part.

To people facing retirement, I'd say, keep going, have something to get up for in the morning and, like Churchill said, never, never give up. But within reason. Be kind to yourself. If there are days you feel tired, listen to your body. But as long as you feel able to do things, go ahead.

This is the last in a series of profiles of individuals who are redefining later life that will appear in FT Weekend Magazine and at [laterlifestories.ft.com](http://laterlifestories.ft.com).

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