

OBITUARY

David Hemblen was a favourite of director Atom Egoyan

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David Hemblen, a respected stage, film, voice actor and theatre director, died on Nov. 16, at age 79. A performer of great versatility, Mr. Hemblen appeared on stage at the National Arts Centre and the Stratford and Shaw festivals, was a regular on the television show *La Femme Nikita*, and played roles in half a dozen films by director Atom Egoyan.

“He was one of the most singular actors I know,” said Mr. Egoyan, who began writing parts with Mr. Hemblen in mind. “He had such an indelible gift. It was so specific, but could be used in a variety of ways. It was an honour to have an actor of that stature work with me.”

Mr. Hemblen is also known for his work in David Cronenberg’s *M Butterfly*, David Wellington’s *I Love A Man in Uniform* and Bruce Pittman’s *Where the Spirit Lives*. The latter was one of the first Canadian films to tackle the history of residential schools. Mr. Hemblen played the director of a school.

“As the villain, he took the scripted role and made it his own,” screenwriter Keith Leckie said, “embodying the duplicitous, manipulative, self-righteous and cruel Director.”

David Hemblen was born in London on Sept. 16, 1941, during the Second World War. He was not quite three years old when the Nazis began bombarding the city with V-1 rockets.

“His family had to go to bomb shelters,” his daughter, Kate, said. “He never really got to know his dad until he returned from the war. That experience shaped him and his attitudes to life.”

Mr. Hemblen, who said he never tasted an orange until years after the war, associated his childhood with the deprivations and limitations of the war and post-war experience. When he immigrated to Canada with his family as a teenager, he left England feeling that, “Great Britain won the war, but lost the peace,” his daughter said. Mr. Hemblen wanted an eventful life and was determined to dedicate himself to the arts and ideas, but he knew that good fortune could end suddenly.

Mr. Hemblen pursued medieval studies at the University of Toronto and then embarked on a PhD in Medieval Theatre there. He appeared in student productions and was spotted by Clifford Williams of the Royal Shakespeare Company. He was subsequently offered a full-season with the Royal Alexandra Theatre. “That was it, I never got my PhD,” Mr. Hemblen said.

By the 1980s he was enjoying a productive association with the Shaw Festival, appearing notably as Cauchon in *Saint Joan* and Rufio in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. He also directed a production of *The Vortex* by Noël Coward on which Mr. Hemblen mentored the emerging actor Peter Krantz.

“He had just an amazing voice,” Mr. Krantz said. “As soon as he started talking, you were listening.” Mr. Krantz came to see Mr. Hemblen as a kindred spirit and mentor. “He was an intelligent guys’ guy.”

It was also at the Shaw Festival where Mr. Hemblen first met actors Peter Keleghan and Tom McCamus, who recounted his admiration for Mr. Hemblen’s portrayal of Cauchon. Years later Mr. McCamus performed the same play in the role of Warwick opposite Cauchon. “Every time I did it I heard David’s voice coming back at me.”

Mr. Keleghan, recalled how Mr. Hemblen would serve as the “backbone” of a production. “There was a depth and a strength to his quietness, intelligence and voice that legitimized things. He didn’t have to be a star, but you couldn’t do without him.”

Filmmaker Atom Egoyan first encountered Mr. Hemblen when he saw the actor play Dr. Astrov in Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* at Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre. Mr. Hemblen received a Dora Mavor Moore award nomination for the role. Mr. Egoyan was transfixed.

Mr. Egoyan recalled once taking the streetcar to drop off the screenplay for his early film *Family Viewing* at Mr. Hemblen’s Toronto home. Mr. Hemblen called him a few days later to say he wanted the part because the script was “artistically driven.”

It was a pivotal moment, “for someone like me who was coming from theatre and wanted to move into film,” Mr. Egoyan said. “He joined those worlds and helped fuse them for me. I realized that if David was saying those lines in film, they’ll be forever. I’m proud that David knew exactly what we intended and I’m privileged that he worked with me. His death is a

huge, monumental loss for me.” Mr. Hemblen received a Genie nomination for his work in *Family Viewing*.

Mr. Hemblen went on to appear in the Egoyan films *Speaking Parts*, *The Adjuster*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Exotica* and *Where The Truth Lies*.

In *The Sweet Hereafter* Mr. Hemblen’s character, Abbott, is confined to a wheelchair following a debilitating stroke. In a troubling scene, Abbott defends his wife (Gabrielle Rose) with a garbled speech when she is confronted by an investigating lawyer (Ian Holm). “There’s a complexity to that scene that Gabrielle and David were able to pull off. It’s one of the most challenging scenes I’ve ever shot for reasons that I can’t explain,” Mr. Egoyan said.

“Just making a living as a Canadian actor is a success story in itself, right there,” said his daughter, who has worked as an actor and props manager in Toronto and is now an art teacher. “I have a lot of admiration for him.”

Kate was the product of Mr. Hemblen’s marriage to Australian-born actor and filmmaker Lyn Wright. The marriage ended in divorce. Kate said her upbringing didn’t offer a conventional form of stability, but was full of “creativity, love and curiosity. It was a very rich – [though] not financially – environment to grow up in and has informed everything I have done.”

In his final years, David Hemblen moved from his house into an apartment across the street, while Kate, her husband and their children moved into his house.

For about a decade, he had a second home in France at Banyuls-sur-Mer near Perpignan. Kate says he loved the pace of life, the wine, the food. He complemented his command of French by studying Catalan. “He loved language,” Kate recounted. “For my 40th birthday the two of us went to the Azores where he tried to pick up as much Portuguese as he could.”

In the final months of his life, Mr. Hemblen spoke to Kate frequently about his love of the theatre. “I realized how much meaning and comfort he took from that and what a big part it played in his life.”

Suffering from a painful, chronic arthritis-related condition coupled with respiratory illness, Mr. Hemblen chose to have a medically assisted death. He leaves his daughter; son-in-law, Glyn Thomas; and grandchildren, Anna and Celyn Thomas.