

# MY IMAGE AND I

How public figures see themselves

# Fire on ice . . .

**A** FORMER wild man and hellraiser turned Bahamian island recluse; erstwhile hard drinker turned hypoglycaemic, once rumbustious and still unpredictable and funny. A man who, they say, cannot go out to buy a packet of cigarettes without causing chaos.

Multi-millionaire actor and poet, gentle and with a face—steel rim bespectacled—that has been described as being like five miles of bad Irish road. Twice bankrupt, twice married, an eccentric who loves the vagabond life . . . Is this Richard Harris, currently playing Pirandello's madman Henry IV?

He opens his Savoy suite door with *da da dum* flourish, wearing a dishevelled look and towelling dressing gown. He looks much older than his 60 years and has the ailing appearance of a Russian dissident who has just made it out of solitary. A quick shower (with singalong), photos of his grandchild, and he is ready to settle down to be interviewed—horizontally.

"I'm going to start off with how I perceive myself sexually," he says, while, like some agitated monkey, his hands go on a nervous excursion; one ends up in his tracksuit pants, middle leg region. "Oh, sorry." There's an Irish questioning tone in the voice—a voice that is husky—and a very gentle, quiet feel to the man.

Harris puts his other hand through wispy, yellow-grey hair, wrings his hands, twiddles his leg and puts his hand in his mouth. He quiets as the interview proceeds.

Ask him about his clothes—football shirt and tracksuit bottoms, no shoes—and he talks, without pause, about his detestation of the American psychoanalytical approach to life . . . his father

didn't know which one he was out of eight children . . . his behaviour became more outrageous. "I'm getting on to clothes. I just chose a roundabout way."

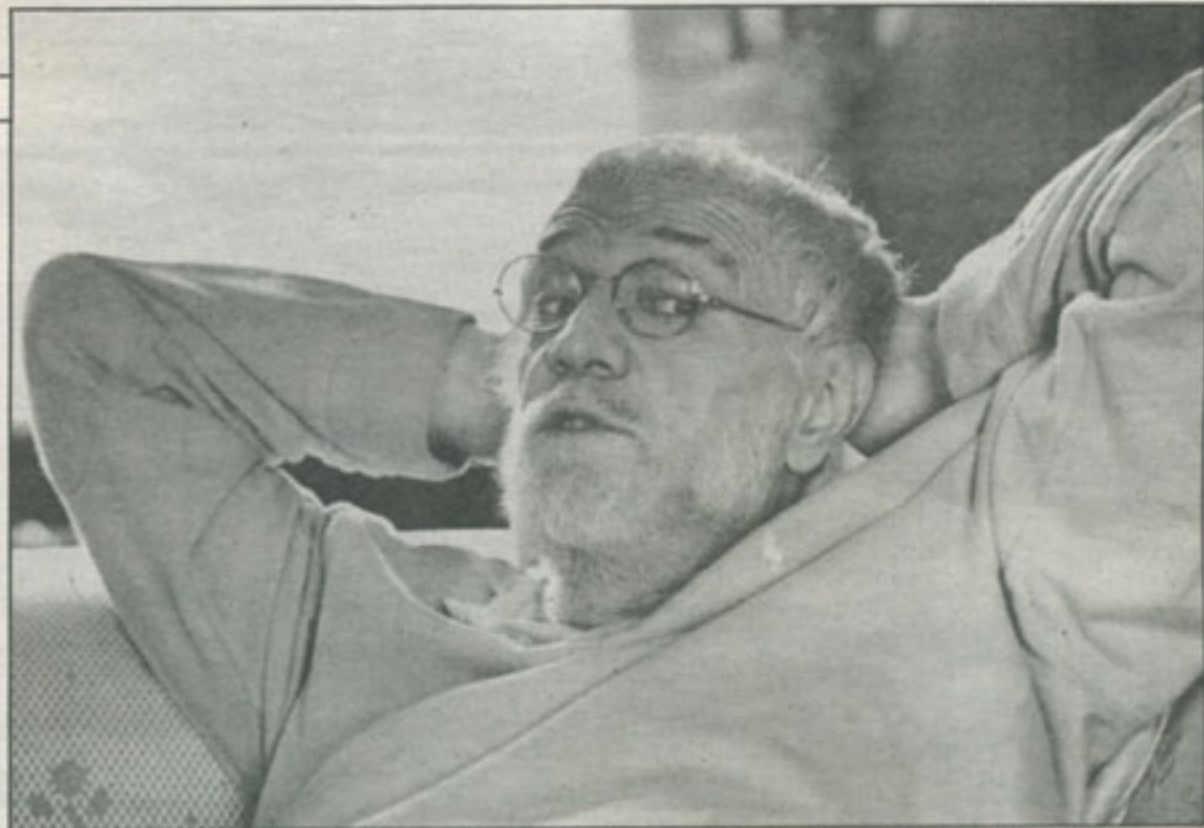
He doesn't like suits or the conventional, wants to be comfortable and is not interested in image. "What my clothes say about me is that I'm not trying to say anything," says the man who has wardrobes of Versaci-type garments—"I love clothes"—that he doesn't wear. He worships his King's Road coat, £30.

And physically? *Gaaaaaad*, he doesn't know, I mean really doesn't know. "I don't like talking about myself. I'd rather read about myself." "Do you think you are good looking?" "No, not at all." "Bad looking?" "I don't think about it. I know that I do attract women."

How tall is he? How about his formerly dyed hair? And so on. "This is the worst interview you are ever going to get"—he sounds het up—"I'm not being difficult."

He has skin that is very white with a reddish undercoat. The face is furrowed, the figure neat. The sideboard chock-a-block with pills bears testimony to his state of health. He got a shock coming to terms with having grey hair, and the beard was grown for Pirandello. And sexually? He throws his cigarette case across the room with thespian humour. "I used to be a sexual tyrant. The stories about me in the Press were true, and they only printed about 10 per cent of my exploits."

Is he proud of that? "I did it and didn't hurt anybody. I don't think I should be proud or otherwise." He later says that through his marriages he kept separate bedrooms



Richard Harris: "I don't care about people's perceptions of me." Picture by Glenn Copus

from his spouses "to retain the mystery". He comes over as a complicated and clever man, watchful of the effect he is having, and very engaging company. How would he describe himself?

"I have a frightening will-power as proven when I stopped drinking overnight." (Alcohol gave him up in 1981.) "I think I'm very reasonable, though I'm absolutely intolerant of half-heartedness."

He most values privacy in his life; and the characteristic he most treasures is loyalty, both in himself and others. "No one can believe how close I am to my two ex-wives."

He abhors his black moods: "But I don't think I can change that. I

frightening—I feel awful afterwards because I know I've terrified people."

Does he see himself as an angry person? "No, no, not at all." (He really means it.) "People say I have an anger. But I don't portray that in my private life."

"I've got two friends from the Fifties—that's all I need. I'm a loner by nature, with an obsession to be by myself. I just like to have time to waste, days to do nothing. (He reads and walks.) I'm alone for 80 per cent of the time in the Bahamas."

"I drank," he later says, chewing his thumb, "because I couldn't really handle company very well. I felt uncomfortable mixing." Lack of self esteem? "No, I treasure myself. I just felt uncomfortable in relationships. I'm just not interested in other people. "Yes, I do have problems with relationships with women. I can't take a dependent woman. I don't like being robbed of time that I prefer to spend by myself. But it's a case of feast or famine. If I'm with someone I want to be with, I devour them." Is he obsessive? "Yes, totally, unbelievably, compulsively. Wanting to be by yourself is obsessive and compulsive, then when I want to be with someone, that is the same too—I'm on the phone day and night, sending them flowers, wanting to be with them all the time. When I get something I

want to do, like the play, I'm frighteningly obsessive."

He has a touching faith. A Catholic in transition, he calls himself, and talks about *The Guy Up There*.

He also has a spiritual guide. "Rosie on My Shoulder," he calls her. "She's here now, a freckled child with red hair. I talk to her and say a prayer to her every night. I ask her things and if I don't warm here (the pit of his stomach) I know it's wrong. I tell people and they say, 'Harris is mad, he's bonkers.'" He tipped me with the winner of the Derby before I left.

Does he think he is mad? "I don't care about people's perceptions of me." And does he see himself as a hellraiser? "Oh yeah, just because I don't drink any more people think I'm not hellraising."

Unpredictable? "To me I'm very predictable. But people in the theatre will think I'm unpredictable because I was in a black mood yesterday." Eccentric? "No." Romantic? "Yep." Sentimental? "I can be accused of that."

Does he think he's gentle? "Very." Witty? "Oh, I think so." Powerful? "I don't know about that. I think I am."

Rude? "I can be, yeah." Idealistic or cynical? "I have a healthy shield of cynicism that forbids me taking anything too seriously."

And is he happy? "I wouldn't," he says, drawing on a cigarette, "have the terrible cheek not to be."

‘Just because I don't drink any more, people think I'm not hellraising’

seem to have an ability to project them onto everybody else so that everyone knows I'm in a black as black as coal-dust mood."

What happens? "I go into myself." What happens in his mind? "There are a lot of negatives, and I'm not a negative person. A lot of gloom, a heavy sheet or shroud is suddenly there and I can't shake it off. I feel if I do explode—and I'm told by everybody that it is quite

spend by myself. But it's a case of feast or famine. If I'm with someone I want to be with, I devour them." Is he obsessive? "Yes, totally, unbelievably, compulsively. Wanting to be by yourself is obsessive and compulsive, then when I want to be with someone, that is the same too—I'm on the phone day and night, sending them flowers, wanting to be with them all the time. When I get something I