

# Naughty Boys

Linda Polan

I'd been out of work for six weeks, four days and three hours; making my fortnightly pilgrimage to the Employment Exchange, collecting my Giro and wondering if anyone was ever going to ask me to work for them again – It's at times like these that I can't think of any good reason for being an actress. I don't even *want* to be one. I'm going to give it up and be a ...

My agent called: 'Linda, I don't know what this is, dear. It may turn out to be impossible, but a man's just phoned from Rotterdam. He seems to be making a film in Holland soon, and when he described the character of the only woman in the movie, I said he ought to meet you. He sounds flamboyant, quite glamorous, in an obvious sort of way. Anyway, dear, go and see him on thursday at the Portabello Hotel, Stanley Gardens, three o'clock. He's called Eric de Kuyper.'

Stanley Gardens. Where the hell's Stanley Gardens? Film people, from the little I knew of them, usually met actors in the upstairs lounges of mediocre hotels in Piccadilly, or, if they were Classy, in suites of rooms at The Hyde Park, smelling of Good Taste, Old Money and Bees-Wax Floor Polish. Stanley Gardens sounded like a nineteen forties leading man. And I'd never heard of the Portabello Hotel.

Stanley Gardens is a beautiful crescent of large white houses in a quiet backwater of Notting Hill Gate. The Portabello Hotel is a conversion of two of these residences, and gives the sense, as you walk into the hallway, that you've come to stay with old friends.

The woman at the desk said Mr. de Kuyper wouldn't be long and would I like to sit in the lounge and could she bring me some tea.

The lounge had glass doors that led to a beautiful and tranquil garden square. All the houses in Stanley Gardens had doors that led into it. The residents sat about on pretty garden furniture, amongst holly hocks and

roses, willow trees and red hot pokers. A very large, English Country Garden, in Central London. Rather a magical garden, actually. I began to think there was something Idyllic about the day. I did hope Eric de Kuypers liked me as much as I liked the surroundings he'd chosen.

'Miss Polan?' I looked up to see a very thin, concave, sandy haired man smiling shyly at me. We shook hands and sat down.

'Last year I was making a film about my friends. It is called *CASTA DIVA*. In it my friends are all playing the parts of themselves. Now, I am ready to make another film. It is called *NAUGHTY BOYS*.'

Aha. Here's the catch. A total stranger wants me to meet him in Notting Hill Gate and go with him to Holland to make a film called *NAUGHTY BOYS*. What sort of an actress does he think I...

'Ah, Miss Polan, I see you are apprehensive. There is no need. *Naughty* is as in children, little boys. Not naughty as in... well, *Naughty*. No, no. I have made this script myself. The words are by Noel Coward, Proust, Pirandello. They are not "naughty". In this film, my friends will again play themselves, but greatly heightened. You understand? Also, I have added a female character. That will be interesting. For me *and* my friends.'

'And for the female, I suppose. The first film... your friends... *are* they chaste goddesses?'

'Ah, you know *Casta Diva*. Well, yes, in a way, they are, but then again...'

This was a very unusual interview. No requests for photos or C.V. We were together for a couple of hours. He explained the plot of the film...

'... a group of young men from Europe, in the nineteen thirties. They come to England. Stay in the country house of an extravagant woman, Daisy. She may be their Mother, Wife, Lover, Nanny, who knows? When she is there, they Live; when she is absent they, how do you say? – moon about, unable to be Present. Full of ennui. They hardly exist. Also, there will be music, from old musical comedies. It will be full of discontinuity and dissonance. No unity. You understand?'

I didn't, but I liked the sound of it and I liked him very much. He seemed interesting and kind and interested & intelligent and wholehearted and sensitive and quite soon I felt I'd known him a long time. I wondered how many other actresses he'd be seeing for this one, female role. Hundreds I supposed.

'... and so, I am asking Delphine Seyrig, but she is too glamorous. I am asking Genevieve Page, but she is too old. Now, I have you. You are just right.'

I felt like Baby Bear's Porridge.

'So, would you like to do it?'

'Yes, thank you. I'd be delighted.'

On the way back to the tube station I was elated. This was partly the usual re-assurance of self-confidence that the actor, poor creature, only really feels on having just been 'chosen', 'found desirable'; but there was something else as well – I had a feeling this Eric de Kuyper and I were going to enjoy working together; that he knew how to provide hard work and fun in the correct proportions.

I ran into a phone box and called my agent.

'He wants me and I've said I'll do it and I'm sure there's no money or very little anyway but I don't mind and I really like him and...'.

'Now, Linda, dear. The European film world isn't terribly reliable, you know. We'll just wait till the Producer calls and then I'll ask for a script. I do hope you didn't actually discuss money, dear. It could make future negotiations difficult. Anyway, somebody wants to see you for a Commercial tomorrow. Potato crisps. New flavour. I think you should go. There's never any harm in *meeting* people.'

I remembered, if I'd forgotten, why actors need agents! Four weeks later, having learned my role, which was mainly one long scene consisting of a succession of interrupted phone calls, I was on my way to Holland, travelling on a ticket bought from a bucket shop, paid for by the producer and sent to me by post! All the negotiations seemed a bit unusual. Not quite as straightforward as I was used to. But then, I was more used to the BBC and the British Theatre than the world of International Movies, and I knew my agent would only give me good advice –

'I'm sure they're not crooked, dear, just probably ignorant due to inexperience. Don't leave the country without your money and insist on your expenses the moment you arrive – in your hand.'

I was met at Rotterdam Airport by a very young man in jeans and a sweat-shirt that was more holes than shirt, who led me to a beat-up old car with no door handles on the outside. He crawled in through the window on the driver's side and opened the passenger door from inside. I decided not to mention my expenses just yet!

'We will drive to the Hague. It will not take long.' The rate he drove – we could have crossed Europe in half an hour. 'They said I was to bring you to the Studio, but first, perhaps, you would like to go to your hotel? They are in the same street.'

The hotel looked like a corner shop, and it was closed. The young man fetched an older man from a bar across the road. He shuffled past me and unlocked a door in the side street, leading directly off the pavement to a flight of steep, unlighted stairs. He led me to an attic room at the top of the building. It was very dark. He switched on the light. An unshaded bulb of thirty watts swung from the ceiling which was grey and festooned with

cobwebs. The window was small and grimy and the curtains didn't meet. The lavatory and wash basin were in a cupboard on the landing and served all the rooms on that floor. I knew I would never be able to use them!

I felt a bit sick and wondered whether or not to cry. I decided against it, and for a shred of comfort, I opened my handbag to take a quick look at the return half of my air ticket. Still there!

We came out of the hotel and walked down the street to what looked like a disused cinema. Guess what? Yes, it was a disused cinema. It was to serve as our film studio. Inside, dozens of young people were rushing about with bits of scenery and furniture. Electrical wires were sticking out of holes in the walls and I could hear a noise that sounded to my well tuned ears, like leaking water splashing onto polythene. I wondered what the bathroom arrangements were like in *this* building and how long a person could stay in Holland without going to the lavatory!

Eric de Kuyper appeared, followed by a clutch of young men. These were his friends who would appear in the film. They were very formal, suspicious almost. Most solicitous. We had coffee whilst they asked about my flight, my family, London, my work. Someone even asked if my hotel was satisfactory. At that moment I was still too nervous to give any other than the Stock Social Occasion Reply – 'Oh, thank you. Yes. . . er, fine.'

Looking back as I write this, a year later, I wonder what it was I was so frightened of. I must admit to a terrible fear of being found unsatisfactory – sent back; returned to the manufacturer, like something on approval from Peter Jones. I suppose it was that.

Next, we went to a large, upstairs foyer; a huge space marked out like a rehearsal room at one end, at the other, a kitchen and dining area with space for fifty or sixty people to sit. Eric explained that a friend who knew all about cooking had taken three weeks off work, his holiday, to cater for the film.

We spent the rest of the day rehearsing. The others, none of whom were professional actors, had been doing this in their spare time for about a year. Their relationships were long-standing, intense and quite complicated. In the script they were called upon to show the effect on their lives of the presence of a woman to be played by me. What better way to explore this than to allow it to happen here, in real life, in this very rehearsal situation. As the day wore on I attempted to re-act to each one with personal honesty, trying at the same time, never to be crass or brutal.

We would read a few lines of text and then discuss them and what we'd all felt. This process became a kind of Happening – in which I became the Therapist, the Naughty Boys my Clients. As the work progressed, I found myself internally responding to each one quite differently – Mother, Nanny, Lover, Friend, just as Eric had said at the interview. He watched all

this minutely, knowing, I think, even then, how much it would inform the more 'regular' rehearsing when we came to it. The difficult, technical task for him as the Director, was to ensure that we all reached the same pitch of energy and emotional intensity when we finally shot the scene. This is always hard to achieve in concerted scenes, but more so here, where the expertise and experience of the group differed so greatly from that of one member.

At the end of that first day I was exhausted. Being challenged by eight expectant young men for hours at a time is deeply tiring! Also, of course, I didn't *merely* want to meet their challenge and fulfill their expectations – I wanted them to like me as well!!!

In the evening a huge dinner had been arranged at the home of the Designer. It may have been the wine, or maybe I was flushed with the success of my labours, anyway, I found the courage to say that my hotel wasn't satisfactory at all, and please could it be changed. I suppose I felt accepted by then – too late to send me back to the Maker! It still seemed a bit 'Starry' – especially when I learned that everyone else was living on someone else's floor – but I reckoned that at forty-four I'd probably earned the Right...

Anyway, after the dinner I was whisked away to the Kurhaus, The Hague's most lovely hotel, a sort of Ritz-by-the-Sea, where I was given a suite of rooms and a car and driver were put constantly at my disposal.

My scenes were to be shot, as was the whole movie, in very long takes; seven and eight minutes were not unusual. Eric de Kuyper has little interest in editing, and anyway believes that what the Director cannot control, due to lack of finance, he must exploit to his advantage; conceal within the work. We rehearsed as though it were a theatre piece; revealing, adding, refining, growing, day by day until we were all 'on the boil' – ready to 'do' it – just the once, as it were. The Naughty Boys were quite frightened by this method. Part of their confidence came from their idea that in movies you just do it over and over, till you get it right! Ten minute takes over and over didn't appeal to me much, and in the event, we used our rehearsal time profitably, for it was only necessary to do two takes. 'One for the Actors, One for the Camera,' said the Director.

Meal times were a joy. No location caterer could have come up with the gastronomic delights provided by the Director's friend, assisted by the Producer's wife! There were always fresh flowers on the tables, a choice of food and wine and my great contribution in the catering department was the organization of a chopping / peeling / washing up rosta, so it was never a burden to one person.

It was a vast and happy family, in which each member had a role of their own and also gave every possible support to their siblings. I had no idea it

was possible, whilst making a movie, to sweep the studio floor, make salad for fifty people, contribute to other actors' scenes (without them feeling threatened), dry a hundred and twenty knives and forks *and* play a leading part, all on the same day.

Working atmospheres are engendered by Directors. Working with Eric de Kuyper is to commit yourself to a task in the company of a benevolent, loving, generous companion/advocate, who provides not only a combination of fun and hard work as I had thought at my interview, but allows and encourages each person to use and reveal life-skills as well as professional accomplishments. This is both rewarding and enhancing to the participants, for each has the opportunity to fulfill their creative potential, both within the film and outside it.

My days in the disused cinema ended. I was presented with a red, leather book, in which everyone had written their names and addresses. '... so you will always know where the Naughty Boys live.' I returned to London and the Employment Exchange.

Six months later I was invited to the Film Festival in Sorrento. NAUGHTY BOYS was to be presented there for the first time. It was shown on the third day, after which I had arranged to fly home.

After the screening I was summoned to the office of the festival organiser. 'Would it be possible for you to stay till the week-end, Miss Polan? There will be a ceremony. An Italian movie star will present the prizes. NAUGHTY BOYS is to have one for the Best Avant Garde Film. We would like you to collect it.'

It's at times like those that I can think of every good reason for being an actress – they're the ones who go to Stanley Gardens in March and by December Monica Vitti's presenting them with gold medallions on the Italian Riviera!