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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Becoming Richard Pryor by Scott Saul

After his childhood, it's no wonder Richard Pryor went bad

Jonathan Dean Published: 11 January 2015

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IN 1977, the black comedian Richard Pryor played a gay-rights gig in - Hollywood. He started well, bringing the audience onside by telling them that (in his Illinois hometown) he had once had oral sex with a man. Then it all went wrong. Bedevilled by drink and drugs, he wrecked a



Bedevelled: Richard Pryor in 1987 (Bob Riha Jr)

night of unity by berating those present for not helping “niggers at all”. He left to boos, backside in the air, asking the crowd to kiss it. The Los Angeles Times wrote: “It takes a certain talent, genius (if you will) to insult 17,000 people — black, white, male, female, straight, gay, rich and poor — at one time.” That, in a sentence, is Pryor: a brilliant aberration.

Scott Saul's *Becoming Richard Pryor* is the only book you need on its subject. A meticulous collector of anecdotes, Saul, an academic and journalist, trawls interviews, law suits, inferior biographies and the comic's own memoir with the aim of writing "about the shaping of a talent until it rose to the level of its full genius". With racial tension headline news again, it is a timely book, and one that the stand-up Mike Epps, due to play Pryor in a biopic, must be studying. His (and Saul's) task is to bring humanity to an often deeply unpleasant life. Saul, at least, succeeds brilliantly.

To say that Pryor's upbringing was hard is an understatement. Born in 1940 in the tough town of Peoria, his mother was a prostitute and he was raised in the family brothel, where he was regularly beaten by his father and grandmother, who dominated his life. He was abused at six, and once found a dead baby in a shoebox. When he bought a white girl at his school a gift, her father yelled: "Nigger, don't ever give my daughter anything."

By 1955 he was ready to escape. A stint in the army followed (he spent some of it in prison after assaulting a racist white soldier), but his life had already been changed by a theatre teacher called Miss Whittaker, whom he met when he was 15. She was, he said, "a magic lady. She just makes you feel like there's something in life." Note he doesn't say "something more", just "something".

Saul is not a demonstrative writer, but then he doesn't need to be. Pryor's dad, for instance, died during a threesome with a prostitute and his 13-year-old daughter. Saul spends pages on the grit and grot of Pryor's Peoria — "the people he'd observed in pulpits, used-car lots, and working-class bars" who would later make up his comedy act. In 1962, newly minted as a comic, he took their stories on the road.

His rise was swift. Pryor claimed that black faces were only being used more on television so that shops could sell sets to black people, but, either way, networks — and Hollywood — liked him. (He made almost 50 films, *Superman III* and *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* among them.) He was, on screen at least, mainstream, but in comparison with fellow black comedian Bill Cosby he came across as "funky, experimental and provocative".

The most telling detail of Saul's gripping read is that it wasn't until 1967 that Pryor told a journalist who he was, or about the pimps who raised him. As if for distraction during that interview, he ran into the street and was ticketed for directing traffic, before jumping fully clothed into a bath and filming dog mess on a lawn. But, still, it was a watershed moment. At the time, he was the protégé of Bobby Darin, the cheesy all-American singer, but after this his performances on stage became edgier and edgier.

As well as acting crazy, he could also be viciously cruel, particularly to women, carrying on the violence of his family. One girlfriend wrote on the back of a painting: "If anything happens to me, Richard Pryor did it." Another was beaten over the head with two bottles of Courvoisier. When his second wife, Shelley, came home after giving birth, she found him having sex with the maid.

His great skill — and influence — was to take this (awful) private life public. In a 1971 album, he rified about how his wife "hurt my ego... and I punch her out". The audience laughed. It was a different time.

It was also a difficult time, and Saul places Pryor bang in the centre of a century of troubled black history, with ghetto riots, Malcolm X, Vietnam (of which Pryor was a loud critic) and civil rights. What one is left with, though, is a sense of Pryor running from his past with a point to prove. And when in 1978 his grandmother died, his world, and creativity, juddered to a halt. Saul writes: "Who was he without the woman who had grounded him — loved him, beat him, braced him, and, by her own account, shielded him from the true ugliness of the world?" Two years later, out of his head on cocaine, Pryor doused himself with rum and ran down the street in flames.

He died in 2005 of a heart attack after two decades with multiple sclerosis. (This later stretch of his life is tucked away in an epilogue.) He was still a success in the early 1980s — according to Time he was “the one actor whose name spells HIT” — but the Pryor of the big studio films was nothing like the Pryor of stand-up. “If I’d never seen Richard Pryor before,” wrote the critic Pauline Kael, “I couldn’t have guessed...that he has an excitable greatness in him.”

Perhaps, as the leaves of his family tree fell one by one, he simply ran out of people to prove things to. Perhaps, that day in 1980, when he set himself on fire, sent his ambitions up in flames. He had, either way, simply gone too far.

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