

PROFILE

JACK GILPIN '69

All the World's a Stage

By Janet Reynolds

At first glance, being an Episcopal priest and a well-known stage, television, and film actor may not seem connected. Jack Gilpin '69 begs to differ.

"In the practice of homiletics, you have to exegete the text, the congregation and yourself. That's exactly what you do as an actor," he says on the phone from his Connecticut home. "You draw the truth out of the play, the audience and most of all yourself."

"There's a performance aspect [to doing the liturgy]. Since I'm the only clergy [at St. John's Episcopal Church in New Milford], it's like doing a one-man show every week. But I'm certainly not the main character."

Gilpin became a priest in 2012, after slowly migrating back to the faith of his youth. He attended church sporadically while on the road in regional theater before eventually taking classes at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, while also acting, until he became a priest.

But Gilpin has been an actor ever since he stood on the Exeter stage as Reverend Parris in *The Crucible*. To date he's been in about 30 movies, including *Funny Farm* with Chevy Chase, *Something Wild* with Melanie Griffith, and *Adventureland*. He's also a regular on stages around America and on Broadway, and he has had many TV roles. He was recently seen on the new Showtime series *Billions* and on CBS' *Madam Secretary*. From 1995 to 2001 he had a recurring role on *Law and Order*.

Gilpin got the acting bug when he was 5 and played the Easter bunny in a church pageant. "I remember at the curtain call munching on a jelly bean and looking at the audience and thinking, 'This is very cool,'" he says.

At Exeter he moved from the bunny to play meatier roles. His portrayal of Reverend Parris (foretelling his next career?) was directed by Rod Marriott and Tom Hinkel. He was in *Hamlet*, also directed by Marriott. "Rod

was my main mentor in theater at Exeter," Gilpin says.

"We were in what had been the old Episcopal parish hall," he says of his Exeter theater days. "It was a fairly flexible space, before the new theater was put in. It was a good playground for us to experiment in."

Gilpin also got a chance to direct while at Exeter, taking on Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*. "That gave me a lifelong feel for Pinter as a playwright," he says.

From Exeter, Gilpin went to Harvard "with a vague intention of going into the law." He continued to do a lot of theater, though. "My sophomore year, I realized I didn't want to spend life behind a desk."

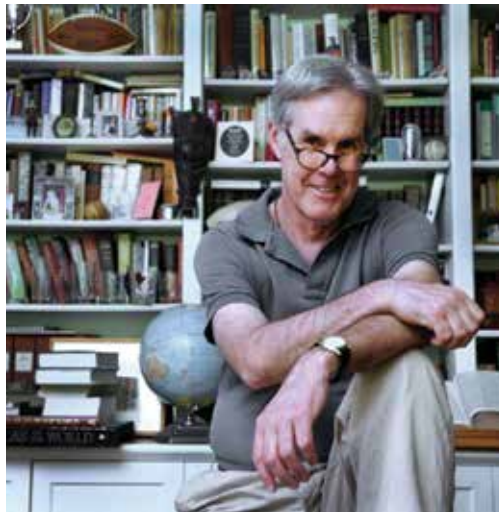
Gilpin continued on to acting school in New York and was soon a regular on stages and, eventually, on TV and in movies. In between, he married and had three children, one of whom, Betty Gilpin, is an actor as well.

While juggling the needs of ministering to a congregation and an audience might seem far apart, Gilpin believes the two clearly feed and inform each other. "What I like most about acting is the process of exploration, of yourself and of the character, and the sense of risk that you have to have," he says.

"I love rehearsal for that reason," he adds. "You're working with people whose imaginations are alive, who are willing to trust each other, to explore whatever life is going to put in front of them on a given day. It's a great gift, to be part of that."

Being a priest is similar, he says. "You're dealing with people in their highest highs and their lowest lows. You're walking with them through the deepest and most important dimensions of their lives. That's the juice. It's also an infinite gift they give you, to be given their trust, to hold their hand in these times."

"The people in church are like a rehearsal — putting themselves on the line, rejoicing in real achievements, living life fully. I like being around that." ■



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