



# WILD West

As he prepares to reprise his role as Siegfried Farnon in the Christmas special of *All Creatures Great and Small*, Samuel West extols his own passions for wildlife and the countryside

WORDS BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

“Can you hear it? That slightly squeaky, squeeze-out sound. That’s a coal tit,” says the actor Samuel West. We’re in his garden, a swerve of paving, flanked by straggles of green. “I get itchy if I don’t go birding for a while. It stops me thinking so much about myself... It’s so easy to be squashed by human concerns.”

Birding became a serious pursuit 15 years ago, when Samuel was artistic director of the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield. He began listening to a CD of birdsong when driving up the M1 and went walking three or four times a week in the Peak District with his binoculars and telescope. Now, he likes to scoot off to Woodberry Wetlands in east London, near his Islington flat. With more time, he’ll head for the Swale in north Kent or the birding Silk Road, the A149 in north Norfolk. This year, his focus has been on the garden: “I’ve had to start liking the common stuff. You get a coal tit in your garden and you go, ‘It’s a big day – great!’” The “yard list” he has compiled with his partner, the playwright Laura Wade, stands at 39. “I think I’m quite good at birdsong. When we go out birding, Laura’s the eyes and I’m the ears.”

## CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Samuel’s interest in the natural world makes his latest role in *All Creatures Great and Small* particularly apt. Samuel, 54, plays Siegfried Farnon, the vet who hires James Herriot (the pen name of Alf Wright, who wrote the books that inspired the TV programmes). This reboot of the original series, which ran from 1978 to 1990, could be just the tonic for 2020. “It’s been a complicated year for a lot of people and I hope that the programme represents a return to a simpler life, a simpler piece of storytelling about things that

matter,” Samuel says. “Community and being kind to each other and being kind to animals, respecting the environment and welcoming strangers.”

Every description of Siegfried turns up the word “eccentric”. On one occasion, Donald Sinclair, the real vet on which he is based, fired a double-barrelled shotgun into the wall of his cottage because he wanted people to go home after dinner. “I really like that,” says Samuel with a smile, “because I’ve wanted to do that quite a lot... How nice to be playing somebody who speaks of doing that and does it.”

Samuel, who once said he tends to play “toffs and soldiers, with a sideline in mass murderers”, is enjoying the chance to play someone funny: “I’m quite a serious person. I have quite a serious voice.” Siegfried’s deadpan humour suits his style. Even in *All Creatures*, “a comedy drama”, he sees topical parallels: the wariness of anyone different. “We’ve been slightly sold the idea that we must be suspicious of outsiders, but what James [Herriot] proves is that you need to open your borders to committed, clever people, who are going to make your place better.”

That may be, but what about the serious desire for escapism into the country lives of vets and their animals? The vets need to be believable, even when they have their hands up a prosthetic cow. Samuel, who worked a lot with horses, felt reassured in his role when the on-set vet (a real one) gave him Donald Sinclair’s hoof knife. “As an actor, you’re thinking, ‘Oh god, is anyone going to believe me? Do I believe myself?’ But when something like that comes your way, you think, ‘Yeah, okay, I can do this.’”

The cast stayed in Skipton, north Yorkshire, during filming and Samuel hopes, if the series gets recommissioned, he could take his parents’ narrowboat there and live on it. He has spent holidays on canalboats since he was a child, when his parents, the actors ▶

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Timothy West and Prunella Scales, used to rent one. From 2014 to 2019, they made *Great Canal Journeys* for Channel 4, crossing waterways across the country and beyond. “I wish they were still doing it,” says Samuel, who lived on a boat on the Avon in 2000 while he was acting with the Royal Shakespeare Company. “They’ve got a bit frail now.” Prunella has Alzheimer’s.

SOCIAL GLUE

Samuel and Laura are based in the city for easy access to London theatres, but both work with venues outside the capital and Samuel has been vocal about the need to support arts across the country. Regional theatre and choirs, he has said, are “social glue”. He worries about their demise: “Cheap and available access to the arts is what made me who I am, so I use my voice to try to call for that because I think it’s transformative.” He chairs the National Campaign for the Arts, a lobbying group for public funding.

Now, however, we must all battle against a “venal and hopeless” government, who, he suspects, don’t want people to become more empathetic and be transformed. He blames the government for insisting there is no such thing as society, hoping that recent events have proved them wrong. “One of the positive things about this terrible year has been that we have realised that there is such a thing as local community... This current government is very second eleven, in my opinion, and I think we will see through them.”

Samuel worries, however, that with the closure of libraries, pubs and community halls, free or cheap public places, especially in rural areas, have become rare: “I don’t know where we’re going to go to sort out who we are... We are a divided nation. We need to be able to come together and talk about this so that we can get to know each other again, otherwise we’re screwed.” His tones are so measured and the delivery so eloquent that objections seem out of the question.

Samuel was introduced to campaigning as a child, going on CND marches with his parents, as well as anti-capitalist demonstrations. He has said before that he thinks a lot of actors are socialists because they work collectively. He has the charm to be persuasive but has said he would hate to toe the party line if he went into politics. Samuel’s conviction is unshakable: “I own all the cards of white male privilege, but I want everyone to have it.”

He was brought up, he says, with “a sort of benign neglect... It was the Seventies way... We were just left to get on with things and sort things out for ourselves.” His parents were “away a little more than I’d like. I mean, always working – successful, which was great – but I think it made me a tiny bit needy.” Samuel loved seeing his father act and sitting in his mother’s dressing room, although he didn’t consider becoming an actor until he was at Oxford. (His mother suggested he train first as a plumber.)

POETRY DAD

Samuel and Laura have two daughters, aged six and three. “It’s totally changed my life [having children],” he says, waving to them through the window. “I turned down quite a lot of work when they were young. Our first child was two-and-a-half before I spent more than a night away and I didn’t like it when I had to. I’ve tried to be a bit more present.”

At home, Samuel plays ‘poetry dad’, reciting work around the flat before

recording it for his pandemic project, where, every day, he has been reading out poems suggested by his 62,000 Twitter followers from the garden shed. He has memorised poems ever since he was “a slightly shy and lonesome teenager – I liked having stuff that I could amuse myself with at bus stops”. He has also recently played ‘hairstylist dad’, cutting his children’s fringes during lockdown, and ‘piano dad’, playing alongside his six-year-old.

On Saturday, he cooks American-style blueberry pancakes for the children. He might also bake injera, Ethiopian flatbread (“our version of lockdown sourdough”), and, as the winter deepens, he’ll cook with homegrown chillis. Pots of stingingly hot White Bhut Jolokia wait in the garden. Samuel will make Sichuan chilli oil, infusing canola oil with Sichuan peppercorns, garlic, star anise and Ethiopian spices, which he pours over dried chillies (“they crackle, and it smells fantastic”). The family will have it with noodles over Christmas.

Christmas for actors often involves giving readings at carol services. On Christmas Eve, however, the family, Timothy West and Prunella Scales included, will go to *Midnight Mass*. “I love nesting. I want to pull things around me,” Samuel says.

ACHIEVEMENT V SUCCESS

Samuel is desperately hoping that next year he’ll be able to revive *The Watsons*, a play written by Laura adapted from Jane Austen’s unfinished novel of the same name. He was directing it, but the latest run, in the West End, was put on hold when lockdown struck. Longer-term, he hopes to direct a film, but prefers to think of achievement rather than success. “Achievement is an internal sense that you did good or that you did important,” he says. “Success is more like a fashion... it’s got in it the seed of failure. You’re relying on people to like what you do. The only thing you can control is your intention. You make choices, you work hard and people like it or they don’t.”

Achievement, he continues, is very often collective. “The best feeling as an actor, or as a human actually, is to be part of something bigger than you; to look around when you’ve done something and go: how the \*\*\*\* did we do that? I’m really addicted to that feeling.”

For now, another bird might be good: 40 by the end of the year? And then maybe another series of *All Creatures Great and Small*...



FROM TOP Playing Richard II; working on *The Watsons* with partner Laura Wade; as Siegfried Farnon in *All Creatures Great and Small*; with Callum Woodhouse (Tristan Farnon) and Anna Madeley (Mrs Hall)

BEST OF THE West

**1966** Born in south London to actors Timothy West and Prunella Scales

**1985-1988** Reads English at Oxford, where he performs in 17 plays in three years

**1993** Nominated for a Bafta for his role in the Merchant Ivory adaptation of *Howard’s End*

**2000-2002** Plays the title roles in *Hamlet* and *Richard II* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, when he lives on a boat on the Avon

**2005-2007** Becomes artistic director of the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield

**2010** Nominated for an Olivier Award for his role in *Enron* (Minerva Theatre, Chichester; Royal Court Theatre; Noel Coward Theatre)

**2014** Becomes chair of the National Campaign for the Arts, campaigning for public funding

**2018-2019** Directs the play *The Watsons* by his partner, Laura Wade (Minerva Theatre, Chichester; Menier Chocolate Factory)

**2020** Plays senior vet Siegfried Farnon in *All Creatures Great and Small* on Channel 5

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