

ARTS

Daisy Campbell: 'My father was an overpowering, goading godlike being in my life'

The daughter of cult figure Ken Campbell talks about her new autobiographical show



Daisy Campbell: "I feel it's my job to carry on the family business"
JONATHAN GREET

When Daisy Campbell was six, she went with her father, Ken Campbell, to visit the Czech film director Otakar Votocek. "The daughter will go farther than her father," Votocek pronounced, in a story that Ken used to love repeating to his annoyed daughter.

Visiting eminent Czech directors is not what your average dad does when it's his turn to look after the child, but then Ken Campbell was not your average anything. In the 20-odd years before his death, aged 66 in 2008, this actor-cum-director-cum-comedy-theatre-guru became a cult figure for the intellectually curious one-man shows that he performed at the National Theatre in London, and around the country. In these shows this bushy-eyebrowed charisma merchant turned pursuing esoteric ideas into an art form. When a teenaged Daisy suggested he buy himself a computer, he bought an African grey parrot called Doris. Eccentric doesn't begin to cover it.

Before he was a solo act, though, and even before his 1980s fame for playing Alf Garnett's neighbour in the sitcom *In Sickness and in Health* and playing the Devil in a Kit Kat advert, Campbell's fearless feats of theatrical waggery took in two marathon acts of staging. In 1979 he put on the 22-hour play *The Warp* — although it was even longer when Daisy revived it in east London in the 1990s.

Three years before that he staged *Illuminatus!*, a nine-hour adaptation of a sci-fi trilogy by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea, which was based on the idea that every conspiracy you had heard of was true — and that there were a few more you should know about besides. ("It's a mix of truth and lies and research and fantasy and myth and true occults teaching and nonsense and bollocks," says Daisy.)



Ken Campbell's 1976 staging of *Illuminatus!*, featuring Bill Nighy, centre

After its first run in Liverpool, with a cast including Jim Broadbent and its co-author Chris Langham, it became the first show to be staged at the National Theatre's third auditorium, the Cottesloe. It was at Liverpool, though, that Ken Campbell fell in love with the actress Prunella Gee, in the cast to play Eris, goddess of discord. During their backstage affair, they conceived their daughter, Daisy Eris Campbell.

Now Daisy, 39, is depicting some of those events — including, yes, her conception — in her new show, *Cosmic Trigger*. Coming in at a comparatively trim 3 hours 45 minutes, it's her version of Wilson's nonfiction follow-up about the aftershock of becoming a kind of cult figure after the *Illuminatus!* trilogy. Partly *Cosmic Trigger* is about the perils of “reaching Chapel Perilous” — that state where a person's life loses its moorings. “It's a kind of dangerous psychological crossing point that you will reach if you begin to research the occult or do too many brain experiments, dabble in too many psychedelics,” says Daisy, who has more than a bit of her father's propulsive, plosive way with words. After writing the trilogy, Wilson became accused of being head of the Illuminati himself. Also, tragically, in 1976 his daughter Luna was beaten to death, aged 15, during a robbery at the shop in Berkeley, near San Francisco, where she was working after school.

Campbell knows about Chapel Perilous for herself, though. While she was in her teens she was working heavily with her father. She took over from him on the restaging of *The Warp*. They took their show *Pidgin Macbeth* (yes, Shakespeare's play in pidgin English) to the West End. They co-wrote a children's play that appeared at the National, *School Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. She looked set for great things. By the time she was 23, though, she was having a breakdown. “I was drinking too much, I had just become a mum, and I had directed *The Warp*. And if you direct a brilliant 24-hour play with a cast of 40 when you are 18, you get lulled into a sense of, oh, this is what life is. And of course it's not.



With her father, Ken
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“That was part of it. And part of it was my dad being an overpowering, goading, godlike being in my life. Other factors too. All finally tipped over the edge by reading *Illuminatus!* and trying to write my own [equivalent of] *The Warp*, which I failed at.”

Campbell decamped to Spain to write her masterpiece. When she came back she was wearing rainbow-coloured knickers on her head, with bunches of pink hair sticking out of each leg hole. “The way I describe it now is that I was pronoid, the opposite of paranoid. I had the creeping sensation that everyone was out to help me.” Her parents helped to check her into a recovery centre in Kent. When, a while after that, she stopped drinking, things settled down.

For a long time after that she couldn’t go near the sort of “psychedelic” stage ideas that she had first explored with her father. “All the stuff I loved. I thought it would just trigger me.” Mixed in with that was her push-pull between pride and pleasure at working with her dad and her desire to be her own person. “That was the big struggle when he was alive. I was only 30 when he died. His stuff was always the most fun going on anywhere, and for most of the time I was an absolute willing part of that. And then there came, you know, the time when I had to stop working with him for a while, and it was really tough. If Dr Hindsight could have told me, ‘He’s only going to be around for another couple of years,’ I could have gone, ‘Oh, fine, I’ll just keep going then.’ Now, though, I just feel it’s



The cast of *Cosmic Trigger*,
Campbell's autobiographical
play
JONATHAN GREET

In which spirit her own 17-year-old daughter, Dixie, is in the show playing Luna Wilson. They live in Brighton, East Sussex, with Campbell's partner, Greg Donaldson, but I meet her where she's staying at the flat in north London where her mother lives and now practises as a psychotherapist specialising in addiction. Campbell now hopes to launch more theatrical "capers" that will draw, as this show does, on her fascination for the outer possibilities of the human mind. She has a master's in transpersonal psychology and she's gonna use it.

So how, now, does she view the whole "the daughter will go farther than her father" story? That is, as a psychologist might say, quite a heavy burden to lay on someone. On the whole, she says, she's not too worried about it. For four years, while she started work on *Cosmic Trigger*, she was working as a nit nurse in Brighton. "So I just have this joyous feeling about the whole thing now. I don't have to be a nit nurse, so anything else is a bonus really."

Yes, her father was a complicated figure in her life; the only moment of complete approval she can remember him giving her was after she finished her own stab at playing Phil Masters, the main role in *The Warp*, one of the longest roles in theatre. "Every other time he would kind of try to puncture my bubble in one way or another, but at that moment he said, 'Now what you have done here is extraordinary.'" That's setting a high bar for parental approval. She laughs. "Yeah. Oh yeah. No, he could be an asshole. But he was funny enough with it. If there was an interesting, imaginative and exciting way to do something he would always do that. He was just like he appeared on stage. The asshole recedes and the legend rises after his death, but he was all of those things."

On the other hand, so many of his interests became her interests that now, nearly nine years after his death, it feels self-defeating not to pursue them. "Will I need to strike out on my own? I dunno. Maybe. At some point. There is such a rich vein, though, and it seems to have passed to me. It's my inheritance. It's my legacy."

***Cosmic Trigger* is at the Cockpit Theatre, London NW8 (020 7258 2925), to May 27**