



When a director is talking about a script I can visualise it all. I'm able to say, 'We need to add something here, something to keep things moving.' I put that down to being dyslexic.

Brian Conley



Entertainer, actor and singer. Struggled so much at school he thought he would end up a tramp. Learning his lines is never easy, but he is a huge success on TV and in musical theatre.

When my father died about ten years ago I was filled with grief. I went to see a counsellor and one thing he did was to help take me back in time to my school days. I remembered being in class and we were all getting up to read, everyone taking it in turns. The teacher was getting angry – we must have been misbehaving – and I knew it was getting to my turn and I knew I wouldn't be able to do it.

The counsellor told me to stand behind this young boy, which was me as a child. He said, 'Put your hands on the little lad's shoulders and tell him how you feel.'

I did this and I couldn't speak. I stood there and bawled my eyes out. I was in my early forties then and the pain from all those years ago was still there. I could vividly see what the teacher looked like, what the room felt like. The counsellor said, 'Why don't you have a word with the teacher?' I took the teacher 'outside' the classroom and told her how much she'd upset me and how it had affected me all my life and that she shouldn't have been so hard on that small child.

When the counsellor asked me why I'd taken the teacher outside the room, I told him, 'I didn't want to upset the other kids.' That's how real it was. I completely and utterly believed I was there, in my childhood, with all those emotions I had bottled up for all those years.

School days were hell for me. I can remember being in a writing lesson when I was five or six and having to write the 'a' and the 'b' between two lines on a page. I felt so confused. I didn't know how everyone else was able to do it and what was wrong with me. I desperately tried to keep up.

I was put into the remedial class. We would be trooped out of lessons and that was tough because we'd get picked on by the other kids. I would try to laugh it off but it really affected me. I couldn't get to grips with the maths, reading or writing. I assumed I would end up being a tramp because I was thick. Everyone else was getting on with it. What other answer could there be?

My parents knew something was up. They were worried, really worried, that I would sink. They also did wonder if I wasn't putting in the effort. But if I was in any exam, and I didn't have many, I just used to see them all sitting there writing and I felt as if I'd been beamed down from another planet. I sat there thinking, 'What on earth is this gobbledegook I'm looking at?'

The teachers didn't understand. They thought I was thick or stupid or not trying hard enough. In the end I gave up. I did go to school but I would be trimming the trees, looking after the smaller kids, sorting out the school milk – anything to stop me going to class.

Instead of working on schoolwork, I decided to work on making people laugh. This was my way of defusing the situation and hiding my lack of self-confidence and it became the thing I was good at. It also helped me develop this bravado which masked the fact that I knew in my heart there was something wrong with me. I had a strong singing voice and that, along with the jokes, meant that even at this early age I was disguising my weaknesses and forging my career path.

My mum and dad said to my music teacher Mrs Griffith, 'We don't know what to do with him,' and she replied, 'I want tickets to his first television show. He's got something. Nurture it. Send him to stage school,' which they did.

When I finished school at 16, I lied about my age and got my first real job as a Bluecoat at Pontin's Holiday Camp. Then I fronted a comedy show band and played in pubs and clubs. I was spotted and became a warm-up act for TV shows and then progressed to being on the shows myself. I went on to have my own comedy sketch shows and variety shows on ITV and started playing the lead in West End musicals from **Me and My Girl** to **Jolson, Hairspray, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang** and **Barnum**. I was also in the TV show **The Grimleys**, which was very popular.

I wasn't diagnosed with dyslexia until I was 27. This was a revelation. I remember dreading the tests. I thought I would be sat in a room and forced to read and write but it was much more scientific than that. When they told me I was dyslexic I realised that this was the answer. It was what I had been struggling with all my life. I was blown away.

Of course this didn't mean I stopped struggling. I hadn't realised when I started out on a showbiz career just how much you have to read and how many lines you've got to learn. Some of my worst times are the read-throughs actors have to do when we first start a production. You all sit down round a table and it's the first time you've met everyone and I struggle to read what's in front of me. Words pop into my head and I get anxious and it can get worse and I go into a downward spiral of panic.

I always work hard to try to understand the script before I meet the others. I remember, many years ago, auditioning for a part in a panto. I had been told I was going to play Blackbeard's partner, Scarface, so I'd learned all the words and went to the read-through. When I got there they said, 'No we've changed things. You're now playing the bosun.' I was sitting next to these wonderful comedy actors I really admired – Bernard Bresslaw, Anita Harris – and I turned the page and the first big monologue was the bosun's and I absolutely died. I struggled through the passage, hating every moment.

I always pride myself on working very hard and getting to know every word of a script. By the second day I know it. I have had to learn incredible amounts of dialogue. I've recently done **Barnum** with lots of tongue-twister songs. When I have enough time I can do it. I have had to turn down **EastEnders** because of dyslexia, though. The quick turnaround and the scenes that have to be done that day would be too much for me to learn quickly. If I was there I would live in horror at what I would have to do. I need much more time to learn all my lines and go through them painstakingly. I hosted a TV series on Sky called **Timeline** and had to be very upfront, saying, 'I'm dyslexic. I have to have time.'

I think being dyslexic and the fear of becoming a tramp is what drove me. My success is my way of telling the world I'm not thick.

I look on dyslexia now as a total gift. When I was growing up we lived in a council flat in Kilburn, north London, so I didn't come from a background with a lot of money. Without dyslexia I would probably have been a very good lorry driver, and there's nothing wrong with that, but thanks to dyslexia I have been able to pursue my dream. I have a real gratefulness deep in my core.

Dyslexia has given me the strength to take the knocks along the way, to face tough crowds in the working men's clubs. It helps me think outside the box and see the bigger picture. When a director is talking about a script I can visualise it all. I'm able to say, 'We need to add something here, something to keep things moving.' I put that down to being dyslexic and being a visual person and to knowing intuitively what the audience wants. Comedy may not win Oscars but to make it look easy is a real art.

When I had the help from the counsellor after my dad died and I addressed that particular moment at school, I think I let go of some of my anxiety about reading. I seem to have become much better at it as I have got older. I do read quite a lot now – I just have to put more time in.

One of my daughters was diagnosed with dyslexia when she was very young. We were 'on it' straight away. She had been at a private school with straw boaters, all very Victorian, and when she got to six or seven we realised it was all too academic for her. So we've moved her and she has shone. Everyone has a gift, I really believe that, and hers

is organising. She can sort things out so easily. I can imagine she will shine in a job that involves those skills.

Unlike me, she gets more time in exams. School work can still be tough for her but she works so hard. It's difficult because she sees that her younger sister breezes through. We don't mind so long as we know she's worked hard. She's great socially and we are always happy to help her along.

I would advise her and all other children with dyslexia to appreciate and enjoy the fact that you're different. Embrace the fact that your mind works differently. You are looking at life from another angle. You're not part of the norm and that can be a real bonus in this world. Einstein – the world's greatest thinker – was dyslexic. I read that he didn't speak until he was eight and failed his university entrance exam. How amazing is that?

Schools can sometimes just bash out robots. I know it can be lonely being different and you may not always fit into the system but you will find something – maybe not straight away, but follow your heart. We are living in a visual world. If there is a block where it comes to writing then focus on what you're good at and find the help that's out there now to see you through. Try out the different fonts and the plastic overlays and the spellchecks. You've coped up to this point. You'll cope in the future. I was lucky that I found there was something I was good at and you will find that too.