

Keith Michell

Australian-born actor and director of Chichester Festival Theatre who became famous for his portrayal of Henry VIII

Keith Michell was one of the theatre's great all-rounders. Actor, singer, director and designer, he produced a body of work that ranged from Shakespearean tragedy to West End musicals.

Henry VIII was his most famous role. The Australian-born Michell played the Tudor monarch on stage, in the cinema and on television, most notably in the BBC Two series *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, broadcast in 1970, that went on to become a worldwide hit. A handsomely mounted and intelligently written production, it featured one wife per episode. It drew 14 million viewers when it was repeated on BBC One and was sold to more than 70 countries, including America where it won Michell an Emmy. Two years later, he repeated the role for the cinema in the similarly titled but otherwise differently cast *Henry VIII and His Six Wives*.

While clever make-up and generous padding helped, Michell always managed to look the part. In reality, although he had something of Henry's square jaw, he was tall, slim and sandy-haired with hazel eyes. Yet he loved the challenge of Henry and never tired of playing him, describing the BBC series — in which he brilliantly captured the monarch's journey from handsome and athletic

He wrote a series of cookbooks inspired by his macrobiotic diet

18-year-old to disease-ridden 56-year-old tyrant — as “an actor's dream”.

Michell remained a very good actor rather than a great one. His best work was in popular drama rather than in the more challenging classical repertoire. His daughter, the actress Helena Michell who appeared with her father in the Merchant Ivory film *The Deceivers*, spent many a childhood hour helping him to learn his lines.

Acting apart, he served with distinction as artistic director of the Chichester Festival Theatre from 1974 to 1977. The appointment was a surprise: Michell had never run a company before and he was chosen ahead of Jonathan Miller, Peter Dews and Robin Phillips (obituary, Sept 14, 2015), who all seemed better qualified.

He threw himself enthusiastically into the task. “I knew I should want to do it if I was serious about the theatre,” he recalled later. Michell even designed the artwork for the souvenir programmes



Michell in the BBC television series *Henry VIII and His Six Wives*, with Jane Asher playing Jane Seymour

and was popular with the staff and crew, who appreciated his hands-on approach. He played Oedipus with Diana Dors as Jocasta; Iago in *Othello*; and Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* performed in Chichester Cathedral. He also staged his own play, *In Order of Appearance*, a theatrical journey through the great British monarchs.

Michell was also a gifted artist, whose paintings — often completed in his garden shed studio at home — were regularly exhibited and fetched large sums. He painted his co-stars, scenes from locations, and illustrated both Shakespeare's sonnets and the *Captain Beaky* poems by the actor Jeremy Lloyd (obituary, Dec 24, 2014). Michell appeared in *The Captain Beaky Christmas Show* and as singer-narrator on the record *Captain Beaky and his Band*, which rose to No 5 in the charts. In Australia he used his paintings as backdrops for *Pete McGinty* and *the Dreamtime*,

his musical version of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.

Keith Joseph Michell was born in Adelaide in 1928, the son of Joseph and Alice Michell (née Aslat), known to all by her middle name Maude. He was one of two children; his elder sister Helena predeceased him ten years ago. Joseph was a cabinet-maker who lost everything in the Great Depression and then set up a general store in a small farming settlement in south Australia.

Michell studied at Port Pirie High School, then at the Adelaide Teachers' College and the University of Adelaide. A theatre in Port Pirie was later named after him. The young Michell inherited his love of drawing from his father and of the theatre from his mother. Initially, he studied art and worked as a teacher, but acting in radio productions and with amateur theatre companies led to a change of direction. He made his professional stage debut at the Playbox theatre in Adelaide in 1947.

Playing in Bill Dailly's comedy *Lover's Leap* proved to be a watershed moment in his life. Aware that Laurence Olivier was in town, the young Michell invited him to come and see the play. Olivier was impressed — so much so that he persuaded Michell to come to London, which he did in 1948, taking up one of two places for Australian actors at the Old Vic Theatre School. At that time, Michell lived off a pound a week and supplemented his income by painting portraits of friends.

After touring with the Young Vic company, he made his West End debut in 1951, playing Charles II and singing in the Vivian Ellis musical *And So to Bed*. There followed a five-year stint with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford and a spell at the Old Vic where his best roles included Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

He married, in 1957, the Prague-born actress Jeanette Sterke. She survives

him together with their son Paul, now a barrister in London and their daughter Helena, who performed with both of her parents at Chichester and is married to the playwright Simon David Eden.

Michell was a member of the company under Olivier that launched the new, apron-staged theatre at Chichester and he appeared in two of the three inaugural productions: in the Jacobean play *The Chances* as Don John, and in *The Broken Heart*. Olivier's Chichester venture was to form the launch pad for the National Theatre at the Old Vic, but Michell moved instead to the West End.

He played, in 1966, Henry VIII in the stage romp *The King's Mare*, a performance which eventually led to his casting in the BBC series. He doubled as Cervantes and Don Quixote in the London premiere of the musical *Man of La Mancha*, and teamed up with Diana Rigg as the ill-fated lovers in Ronald Millar's play *Abelard and Heloise* — which hit the headlines for a scene in which they both appeared nude.

As a regular on the small screen, he won acclaim playing Heathcliff in a 1962 production of *Wuthering Heights* before he became famous for his portrayal of the rotund king. He also had a memorable turn in *The Morecambe and Wise Show*: having arrived to star as Captain Tony Snug-Fitting in Wise's play “The Legion of the Lost”, he was surprised when Morecambe suddenly appeared head-to-toe in Tudor costume.

During the 1980s, he appeared in TV productions of several Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and had a regular spot in the hit American series *Murder, She Wrote*, as Dennis Stanton, jewel thief turned insurance claims investigator and friend of Angela Lansbury's Jessica Fletcher. He played Henry VIII once more in Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* for BBC television; to his relief, his costumes weighed much less than the 20-stone of those he had been obliged to wear two decades earlier.

Away from the stage and screen Michell wrote and illustrated a series of cookbooks featuring the macrobiotic diet — based on rice, cereals, vegetables and fish — of which he was a longstanding proponent. His life and work is to be celebrated next summer by a planned retrospective at the Menier Gallery in London.

Keith Michell, actor and theatre director, was born on December 1, 1928. He died on November 20, 2015, aged 88