



A new idea every day: Igor Ustinov at his atelier in Rue, Fribourg.

Igor Ustinov

“Let’s go and do it”

Biologist, sculptor, brilliant inventor. In the Swiss countryside, Igor Ustinov has tapped a source of raw energy. We meet Igor, the son of Peter Ustinov, the legendary Oscar winning movie star, for a conversation about Nero, his grandfather’s real-life plot to murder Hitler, his ancestors at the royal Ethiopian court, and his plans to save the world with plastic bottles.

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By Urs Gehrig

The setting: The village of Rue in the sleepy Freiburg hinterland. A magical source of innovation and imagination slumbers beneath the bucolic meadows. From the nearby castle, aviation pioneer Ferdinand Ferber sent his niece sailing over the fields in a self-made glider over a century ago. She survived. And with her the dream of touching the sky. Igor Ustinov has set up his artist’s studio where Ferber found his gravity defying inspiration.

With a silver streaked lion's mane, a carefully trimmed beard, and a glass of white wine in hand, he stands amongst his bronze sculptures, bursting with raw energy. “I want my sculptures to show optimism and give energy to people,” he tells me. The 64 year old is blessed with the gene of genius. The Ustinov lineage has produced well over fifty artists. The clan's roots stretch to Russia, England, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Switzerland and even to the imperial court of Ethiopia.

Igor's father is Peter Ustinov, the world-renowned actor, writer, director, global citizen, UNICEF ambassador and two-time Oscar winner, brimming with wit and self-irony. Unforgettable how he played the bumbling Emperor Nero in the cinemascope epic, "Quo Vadis," who sang with a trilling voice as Rome burned, and how he collected his tears in a goblet in affected self-pity.

Stepping out of the shadow of this towering figure took "an enormous amount of energy," Igor confides. But he has long since found his way with characteristic Ustinov zeal, dexterity, talent, and restless creative drive. "I can hardly keep up with my ideas," says my disarming host in a soft voice. With his latest stroke of genius, the Swiss citizen strives for nothing less than to lift the world’s less fortunate into the prosperity and hope of the 21st century.



Son of "Nero": Igor Ustinov (r), father Peter and mother Suzanne, 1960.

“Igor is more of a dreamer, at home in his own abstractions, and a fellow of considerable natural charm,” your father wrote about you when you were a teenager. Do you recognize yourself in his words?

It's true, I'm a dreamer in the sense that I can conceptualize and create things in my head. This is, I think, one of my strong qualities.

We are sitting in your studio filled with your sculptures. It's an enormously dense and rich atmosphere. You once said, "I want to stop time in the work of art." Is that still the case?

I think that my art is rooting me in this world. As my father said, I may be a dreamer. I feel a bit like this little boy in the fairy tale who walks in the world and drops little breadcrumbs behind him. What I do is I drop bronze sculptures behind me, and I've been doing this for a quite a while. You see here in my studio maybe more than fifty bronze sculptures accumulated, but this is a small amount of my production. [chuckles]

Basically, this is my way of life. When I think of something, I give it a shape. It's like a game. I'm not an artist who needs to stay alone in his studio for hours to find an idea. I get a new idea every day. I produce the sculpture almost completely in my head. Then, I go and do it. This ability of creating things in my head allows me to do a lot of other things, as well.

Many of your sculptures have fit and lean bodies. Arms up in the air, chests out. And their heads have no eyes and no mouth. What do they symbolize?

I was probably still in school when I created this figure. I called it, "The Mathematician." It was shaped after the number "one," which is our identity, our feeling of being something. My ambition was to create the morphology of energy. When we walk, for instance, when we push a foot forward, there is a desire and a will behind this action.

We create our energy by our motivation. This internal energy fascinates me. In order to express it, I had to get rid of the external attributes of personality, such as ears, nose, eyes. If you concentrate on these details, you can't enter into my world. My world is speaking about what is behind all this.

If you live with my sculptures, you will feel this energy. I want my sculptures to show optimism and give energy to people. If you see a sculpture of an old man with a cane and with wrinkles, you feel like that, even if it's a beautiful sculpture. If an old man sees one of my figures, full of energy, maybe he will feel, "Life is not finished. I can still do something great." This is basically the energy I want to transmit to other people.

Your studio is in the idyllic countryside, only a twenty minutes' drive from the city of Lausanne on Lac Lemman. Why did you move here after having led a sophisticated live in Paris?

My father had been in Switzerland for many years, and he was getting old. So, I decided to come here to be closer to him. I was chosen by this village. It is located in what I call, "middle Switzerland." The country has three levels. Near the lakes: the lawyers, banks, where the service industry are located. From 750 meters above sea level and further up you are in the agricultural Switzerland, which not everybody knows about if you're not Swiss. Then, from 1200 meters and upwards, you have the mountains with the tourist centers and ski slopes.

Linked to the three levels are three types of people. I really like the middle part because you get all the fundamental values of Switzerland that made the reputation of this country. People are friendly, honest, and, if you are ready to integrate, you are accepted. It's not like the philosophers or the artists I used to hang around in Paris. Maybe we don't discuss the same subjects here, but my neighbors are lovely and profoundly good people.

When your father moved your family here in the 1960s, you lived in a hotel suite in Montreux next to Vladimir Nabakov, leading “an appalling existence, like exiled royalty patiently awaiting assassination out of fatalism and force of habit,” as your father wrote in his memoir. Later, your father became a Swiss domiciled for 47 years and seemed to like the discreet and quite Swiss life style. When he was dying in 2004, you held your father’s hand. Was he sad to leave?

He was somebody that was surrounded all his life by millions of people who liked him. When he was in hospital, he was completely alone. In a way, he was certainly aggravated by the issue of having to die. But he was still trying to be funny. He had water in his lungs, and when I would approach the bed, he would make a bubbling sound and pull a face of a dog.

To amuse you?

To make the situation less dramatic. I think there's something cute about it, because you don't know what can happen in life, but at least you can try to make fun of it for your surrounding.

Do you remember what his last words were?

His most important final words he expressed in his last interview. The Sunday Times interviewed my father and myself separately. I finished with the words, "More than being my father, he's my friend." He finished exactly the same way, "More than being my son, he's my friend." We probably wouldn't have told each other that directly. I had a profound and satisfying relation with both of my parents. You get people asking, "You have to kill your father's image to become yourself?" I said, "I never needed to kill anybody. I am myself."

How tough was it to be the son of “Nero”?

You become an adjective. “Son of ...” a famous actor, a writer, a movie director, a raconteur, a world celebrity.

How did you deal that?

It was extremely difficult. You have to have an enormous amount of energy. That's maybe why I'm inclined for energy. When I went through a bad period, a doctor said to me, "How can you, the son of a monument, create monuments? You must have an incredible energy." I fought these battles with myself. I've moved materials more than my body could carry many times. I embossed my soul into the material of the world. It's out there. It's in Bronze. It's in Paris. It's in England. It's in Bulgaria, Switzerland. Shaping my sculptures helped me to become who I am.

It is probably harder to gain recognition from the art establishment when you have famous name. There is a reversed snobbery. That can work as a disadvantage. But art fulfills me to this day. It is my profound nature, my way to feel alive. And after all these years, I have passed all the obstacles.

I was invited to an event at Clarence House with Prince Charles. Before dinner, Camilla approached me, and we spoke about sculpture, and she confessed, “I would have loved to be a sculptor.” I explained to her, “When you sculpt, you forget everything. And it’s wonderful.”

Then Prince Charles came along and said, “Sculptures? Yes. Of course, the problem is to sell them, isn’t it? Hahahaaaahaha.” I thought, not so funny when one must make a living. But to be Prince Charles is also not easy. You have had to adapt in your own right the way you deserve to be considered.

Have you ever thought about changing your name?

No. At some point, I used to sign “Ustinov” without my first name, leaving the privilege of a first name to my father. But everybody knows about those dilemmas, and it’s ridiculous.

How did your father react when he learned that you intend to become an artist?

I remember when I was twelve years old, the headmaster of one of my schools, the “Institut Le Rosey” in Rolle, called my father to his office. He said, “Your son wants to be an artist. Aren’t you worried?” My father replied, “Yes, actually. I am very worried! The other day, I was sitting with the father of Picasso who was also very worried.” [laughs]

Your father seemed to have been a frequent visitor at the headmaster’s office.

Yes. Another time, the headmaster called in my father to complain, “Your son is making everybody laugh, and nobody can study properly.” My father replied, “But I make my living exactly like that. How am I supposed to tell him anything?”

You developed a habit escaping from the school, according to your old school friend Jean-Jacques Gauer who today is one of Switzerland’s leading hotel managers.

Yes, that was fifty years ago. When I ran away a first time, as Jean-Jacques was one of the older students, the director asked him to go find me. He did, and we had a good time. Later, Jean-Jacques would come to me and ask, “When are we leaving again?” I said, “I don’t have plans.” He suggested, “Well, I would like to go see my girlfriend in Lausanne. So, if you don’t mind, why don’t you run away on Friday?” We made a deal. I would run away, and he would come and find me. On our escape we would go to my father’s house, which was empty. All weekends long we managed to be free, and we met with girls from other schools. When we would return to ours, Jean-Jacques would say, looking depressed, “Don’t forget. You are supposed to be unhappy because your parents just divorced.”

Your parents divorced when you were twelve years old. And your father was often abroad. One day, when you turned 18, he took you along for a special trip, and you ended up singing an aria together. It turned out to be a revelation for both of you.

My father was doing a documentary with Natalie Wood in Russia. Natalie Wood’s parents were Russian, actually. Her name was Kousnetzoff, and she spoke Russian fluently.

That was in Leningrad, the hometown of your grandmother. She was a descendent from the legendary Benois family, who brought forth many artists, including painters, sculptors, composers, architects.

Yes. The documentary was shot at the Ermitage Museum in Leningrad in 1974. My father took me along, and I was so happy. When we landed, I couldn't even see out the window. It was foggy and freezing cold. The man who was in charge to bring the staircase to the plane was drunk. Eventually, we managed to get out, and we got slapped in the face by this cold weather. Instead of saying, "Wonderful to be back in the land of my ancestors," I said to myself, "Lucky, I am, that they left." But since then, Russia and the people have really grown on me. Then, came the next surprise. The host, the producer, declared, "We have organized for you to sing one act of an opera by Giovanni Paisiello with your father in the Quarenghi Theater at the Winter Palace."

Did your father know about that?

No. I had a few lessons. He had never sung opera on stage before. Neither had I. I had not even been on a stage before. We ended up both dressed up in wigs and with clothes from the pre-revolution period and sang with the Maly Theater Orchestra. For me, it was really an important moment. I learned a lot from my father during that performance. He was singing with the public while I was singing along with him. So, I did as he did. At the end, we both bowed. My father pointed his hand at me, like fencing, and I reversed. It was like, "Who has the last word?"

Who did?

On stage, he understood that I was not just going to give in.

You pioneered your very own career. You studied to become a professional opera singer. And not only that, you also studied biology and art.

I did the art school at the Paris Beaux-Arts, and I studied biology at the Paris 7 University of Science.

All at the same time?

Yes.

How was it possible to focus on such different topics simultaneously?

My father, deep down, was a playwright. He was fascinated in human relations. He had a sailing boat, and we would sail along the coast. I realized that he was looking at the land, probably imagining what was happening in the houses. I was looking at the sea, at the emptiness of the sky and the ocean. My primary interest was not what the people were doing. I was more fascinated by nature, by the unknown and uncontrollable. I think this is what I looked for when I studied biology. And I looked for the same thing with sculpting. The mysteries of reality. Soon, I realized that I did not have the qualities to be a scientist

because you must wait for the results. The good thing with imagining sculptures, you create your results.

How would you sum up your character in a few words?

My purpose is to overcome this energy that drags you down. I try to make things better in a very simple way, to find a solution. You look at my sculptures, they say, "Let's go and do it."

They're uplifting.

Exactly, this is what I'm trying with everything I do, with my art, my innovations, my foundation. Together, with my father, we founded the Sir Peter Ustinov Institut in Vienna to fight prejudice and discrimination. Europe, the old continent, has produced humanism. I think the most beautiful legacy that we can leave is the culture of respect, mutual respect, respect for intellectual property, respect for diversity, for dialogue. We've developed an educational kit, a kind of game. By playing it, you realize that your enemy might have more in common with you than your best friend. To learn that respect is most profitable for society and nature.

The roots of the Ustinov and Benois families can be traced back to Russia, France, England, Israel, Germany, Switzerland and Ethiopia. His great-grandmother Magdalena was the daughter of an Ethiopian lady and a Swiss missionary from Rheinfelden near Basel. "Being Swiss, he was apparently something of an engineer," Peter Ustinov writes in his memoir, "Dear Me." "And among his other religious duties, he built a cannon for the mad Emperor Tewodros, who had him chained to his own invention so that he couldn't get away and build a cannon for anyone else."

In 1924, a memorable meeting took place in the small apartment of the Ustinov family in London. "During the great exhibition at Wembley, Haile Selassie had come to London to buy a few machine-guns for the Ethiopian army," Peter Ustinov recalls. "My father, making use of his Ethiopian connections, invited the Lion of Judah to dinner." The Emperor happily accepted the invitation and arrived at the small Ustinov apartment accompanied by a delegation of twenty, including the Empress, the chief of general staff, and a few princesses.

Little Peter was woken up to entertain the distinguished guests. Even at the age of three, he was a master at imitating people and was given the task of keeping the Emperor and his entourage happy. Many years later, Peter Ustinov met again with Haile Selassie at the Ethiopian pavilion at the Osaka World Fair. "I sat by the aged monarch and reminded him of the evening," Ustinov recalls. "Before I had finished my very brief résumé of the event, he had fallen into a fitful sleep at the recollection, which leads me to believe that my performance in 1924 had not been a success."

Are you still in contact with members of the Ethiopian royal family?

Last year, I was invited to the Royal Victoria and Albert museum because the British decided to lend back to Ethiopia the crown of their Emperor Tewodros the Second. I was told that the skull of Tewodros had been found in a garden of the British palace. I was invited because the historians figured that my link to the royal family of Ethiopia was remarkably close, considering that the mother of my great grandmother was an Oromo princess. A lot of

Rastafarian people from Jamaica also attended the ceremony. They looked at me in disbelief. “You are close to the imperial family, and you are white?” they seemed to wonder. I was destroying the view of the religion and the tradition. And I felt they were annoyed that I was closer to the emperor than them.

Recently, ethnic violence flared up in Ethiopia. At least two hundred people were killed in the past weeks.

The mass killings occurred following the murder of a popular singer [Hachalu Hundessa, Red] who was a hero to many Oromo. The victims of the massacre are Oromo, my tribe, the largest in all of Ethiopia. A friend of mine in Geneva, who is an Oromo princess, approached me the other week. She is worried that Ethiopia is turning into a new Ruanda. [Ustinov grabs his cellphone and reads.] “Bonjour, le peuple Oromo a besoin de ton aide.” She wants me to stand up for the rights of the Oromo.

You might become a new Oromo tribal leader?

[laughs] That would be very funny. What’s next? Although, I am proud of my Oromo roots!

Your family is never at a lack of surprises. A few years back, a carefully hidden side of your grandfather, Jonas Ustinov, was revealed.

Yes. He was a spy.

Not an ordinary spy, as it turned out.

If you're a spy, you're a very secretive person. My grandfather had many girlfriends. A man leading several lives. He was called, “Klop.” “Klop” in Russian means, “bedbug.” It was his wife, my grandmother who called him that because he was always jumping from one bed to another. [laughs]

She obviously was aware of it?

Yes, she was aware of that secret in his life, and she suffered a bit. But she had no clue what he really did as a spy. In his autobiography, my father speaks of his father as a poor rich man, in the sense that he had all the behavior of a rich man but, unfortunately, he did not have the money.

He portrayed him as a jolly underdog.

It's a bit tragic that he didn't realize who his father really was. My grandfather didn't lay out what he was doing. So, it remained completely unknown what important role he played in the war.

During the First World, Jonas Ustinov fought as a pilot on the German side. In the early 1930s, he worked as press attaché at the German embassy in London. When he was asked to deliver the "Aryan Proof" (Ariernachweis), he abandoned his German passport, threw his Iron Cross in the trash, became a British citizen, and fought the Nazi regime as a secret agent for

the MI5. What exact role he played was only revealed in 2002 when British archives gave access to documents of the time.

Long before the assassination conspiracy by Graf von Stauffenberg in 1944, “Klop” Ustinov was central to a plan to overthrow Adolf Hitler and prevent the war. Months before the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, the German resistance group around Admiral Canaris and Lieutenant Colonel Oster passed Hitler’s secret plans to the British. They hoped to persuade the British government to threaten Germany with a military counterstrike. With support from London, the officers in Berlin wanted to risk the coup.

The contact person of the German resistance officers in the British capital was a MI5 top agent with the code name, "Middelton-Peddelton." Behind this code name was your grandfather, Jonas Ustinov.

Yes. A film crew from German ARD television researching a documentary revealed the crucial role my grandfather played. As the press attaché of the German embassy, he would see all sorts of messages that were clearly announcing that Hitler was waging war. As it turned out my grandfather worked closely with a German diplomat called, “Wolfgang Gans Edler Herr zu Putlitz,” an aristocrat. They decided both, together, to start stealing German documents, making photographic copies with a Minox, a subminiature camera, and making them available to the British. [Later MI5 Assistant Director Peter Wright, author of “Spy Catcher,” alleged that Putlitz, via Ustinov, delivered “possibly the most important human-source intelligence Britain received in the prewar period.”

Our whole family had no clue about my granddad’s secret life. When they opened the files of the Secret Service, they suddenly realized what a great contribution he made and the risks he took towards peace and winning the war.

Trying to make life better obviously runs in your family. And it is key to your most recent project. You are designing houses built entirely from plastic. Where did you get this idea?

During 21 years at the head of the Peter Ustinov Foundation, we built an orphanage in St. Petersburg, a school in Nepal, and many more projects. Each time, I said to myself, "If only we had a good construction system, we could build two schools for the same price." I wondered how to build more efficiently. If you use wood, there’s the problem of deforestation. And with concrete, there is the problem of worldwide sand shortages. I found my solution in plastic bottles.

PET [polyethylene terephthalate] bottles?

Yes. But how would I make them to build walls and houses? I was very ambitious, a bit like my grandfather. I said to myself, "I will redesign the bottles so we could connect them together and fill them with hardened earth.”

Like Lego.

Yes. I tried to convince Nestlé and Danone to change the shape of their bottles. They surveyed it very carefully, but eventually said, “Your PET bottle weighs 32 grams. Our bottles weigh 23. There’s a nine gram difference, and this makes an enormous amount of extra material to produce.” I realized I was naïve. To redesign bottles means to redesign whole factories. It is impossible. I decided to do it differently, by extrusion. An extrusion machine is a bit like when you make a sausage. You put paste on one side, and it comes out in the profile shape you designed.

How do you build the houses with this material?

The secret is in the design we conceived that allies prim ratios between efficient production cost, but is mostly the result of high construction performances, modularity, scalable to produce, and easy to transport and implement on a construction site. The outcome today is far from the original bottle construction inspiration. We are now creating an alternative to traditional construction. We founded the Ustinov Hoffmann Construction System (UHCS), a patented modular construction system developed in Switzerland and made of recycled, upcycled PET. We have reached the highest Swiss construction SIA or ISO norms.

You can design the houses in different shapes, according to the traditions of the countries from Africa, Siberia to Asia, wherever you build them?

Yes. The UHCS construction system can adapt to most local architectural and cultural traditions. You can make it look like whatever you like. The houses are made with a beam load system with intermediary parts that are also made with recycled PET foam. The idea is basically to recycle all the waste and to up-cycle them in a local circular economy to provide quality housing. Today, concrete represents about 8% of CO2 emissions in the world. It's enormous. To make one ton of concrete you need 520 liters of water, and water is becoming very scarce and precious in many parts of the world.

When I was born in 1956, the world population was around 2.4 billion. Now we are at 7.9 billion. All the problems should be seen differently today. To manufacture houses out of upcycled plastic is much more ecological. As it does not waste or dispose of natural resources, they are therefore preserved. And the UHCS production process is not greedy in energy.

And PET is a waste product in many countries.

You can minimize two of the world’s leading problems: the lack of adequate quality housing; and widespread pollution resulting from discarded plastic bottles. In Kenya, for example, there is waste of PET bottles for 100,000 UHCS houses.

But would people, who have been living in mud or wooden huts, feel comfortable in homes made of plastic?

Yes, absolutely. Why not? If you want mud, you can always put mud on it so they look traditional. You won't see the difference. UHCS is not only the house itself. It will give rise to existing new technologies of heating and cooling, temperature control, security, connectivity, data control, solar energy.... etc. I would like UHCS houses to produce electricity and

vegetables that would probably pay part of your mortgage and food expenses, etc. All this is possible today.

In terms of expenses, can your plastic houses compete with mud houses which cost next to nothing in Africa?

It's a misunderstanding to associate UHCS to a construction system for the low income population, UHCS has been conceived to be cost efficient, yes, but to reach the highest standards of construction norms — to provide comfort, security in a sustainable manner, for humans to prosper but with a minimum impact on nature.

My answer is — thanks to UHCS technology and construction system that can easily adapt to any market — for the first time it will be possible to accelerate the development policies aimed at populations who were, up to now, doomed to their the mud homes in villages where people, in darkness, sleep on wooden benches. UHCS can design homes that will produce their own electricity for children to read their schoolbooks and families to rejoice. Our ambition is to upcycle people's lives, not only recycled PET. It's not just about replacing mud houses. It is about giving access to modern life, to free human imagination. We can bring the world into the 21st century.



"Minimize two of the world's leading problems": House made of recycled plastic bottles.

<http://www.igorustinov.com/>

<https://www.ustinov-stiftung.de/homepage>

<https://ustinovhoffmannconstructionsystem.com/?lang=en>

[https://www.weltwoche.ch/ausgaben/2020-33/weltwoche-international/wi-ustinov-die-weltwoche-
ausgabe-33-2020.html](https://www.weltwoche.ch/ausgaben/2020-33/weltwoche-international/wi-ustinov-die-weltwoche-ausgabe-33-2020.html)

-The Ustinov Hoffmann Construction System (UHCS) was invented and founded by Igor Ustinov and André Hoffmann, vice chairman of Roche Holding Ltd., In 2017, it won the International Federation of Inventors' Associations' (IFIA) Prize and many more awards at many other events. The first plastic house of UHCS will be inaugurated in the Swiss canton of Valais in 2021.

-The next exhibition of Igor Ustinov's sculptures will take place the September 11th to October 20th in the Swiss city of Neuchatel at the gallery "Espace Schilling" in the garden of the CIC Bank and at Villa Castellane.