

Anatomy of an enigma

He has achieved worldwide fame for bringing anatomy to the masses but little is known about the person behind plastination.....until now: *Medical Student* speaks to Gunther Von Hagens



Wisam Alwan
Guest Writer

Hagens dissect bodies for a TV audience.

When did you first develop an interest in medicine and the human body?

I'm the middle one of five children and as I small boy I remember watching my pregnant mother entering labour. She started saying things I couldn't understand: I knew something wasn't right and it intrigued me. From then my hobbies for several years were psychotherapy and hypnotising people. I was really pro on this! I read all there was on hypnosis. In East Germany, we were under communist rule and this was not a very party-like activity. I needed special permission from the hospital that I started at as a male nurse and I spent several weekends there reading the literature. Then I started medicine and I hypnotised many of my colleagues and did very intensive psychological testing using a 550 question questionnaire. All this tells you the feeling I had for psychological effect and problems. I had wanted to work in psychotherapy for some time but gave it up while still a medical student.

Why did you give it up?

I was doing my psychiatry and psychotherapy placements in my university in Jena and found that it was not as compelling as I thought, as it was a job where nothing changes.

What were your aspirations on leaving medical school?

My aspirations were that I wanted to work internationally because I originate from East Germany where I was caught in a small country for 25 years. I wanted to work in something to do with organisational skills first of all, so I did a tropical medicine course for the

American state examination, to qualify for that. I also did anaesthesiology and emergency medicine, because these are specialities needed in every country but I didn't like anaesthesiology or surgery because it's not so much of an intellectual challenge. Surgeons please understand me but an operation takes 10-14 hours, it's tedious. It turns into a routine; you're not even allowed to think of something different, to wonder for yourself, because you have to concentrate on this.

What made you go public with your work on anatomy?

I always liked to share my knowledge with laypeople. When I was a male nurse I used to run behind a big group of doctors and I was always disgruntled that they had their own language, a language which makes it impossible for a layperson to understand the position whether he suffers from a heart infarct or fungus of the foot. As a result, democratisation of anatomy and anatomical language was very dear to my heart from early on so when I was in prison I gave

medical lectures to the other inmates. My lectures were always filled up because I made them interesting. I did it with models and slides so it was always an event. At the University of Heidelberg, students still talk about my lectures today, ten years after I left because I always tried to make it interesting and entertaining. So coming back to your question on the media, I thought it was not right that the object of anatomy could not view the dissection room. This always made me angry as a student, I was angry before I started, when I started and even as a medical doctor that normal people could not enter the dissection room. In our modern society, there are two areas you cannot enter: the operating room and dissection room. The operating room I can understand because of the need for a sterile environment but the dissection room, there is no reason.

So I call it entertainment, anatomic entertainment. Event anatomy, I think I am an event anatomist, the first event anatomist. The anatomists of the renaissance who did the

public autopsy also called it an event hence I wear the hat of those anatomists, which they wore as a sign of their independence - the same hat that as worn by Dr Tulp in Rembrandt's famous picture (*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*)

What drives people to donate their bodies to you?

Well, I know the answer quite well because several studies have been done, not just by us but by the research institutes. Every year or every second year we hold a meeting with all the body donors. We had about 800 came to last year's meeting. We give people a 53 question questionnaire to build a profile about them. What we find is that most people donate their bodies after seeing *Body Worlds* because they believe that doing this is beneficial to medicine, to education and enlightenment. This is the most common reason. This goes along the fact that the majority of those who donate their body, or many of them, have a complicated medical history and needed medical intervention in



the past. They have some close feeling for medicine and see more than others the need of the medical doctor and enlightenment of anatomy. The second reason is that many old people don't have any relatives any more or because our moving society means their loved ones live in other places and it's difficult to find a grave and be cared for. Finally, I believe that mortality is one of the biggest insults, betrayal or whatever you call it in English, to mankind. And to cope with that is very difficult for many people, for most people. And to be confronted by *Body Worlds* you are with mortality. Put it this way, we die a double death. We die a death of our soul, of our consciousness, and we die a death of our body. The body disintegrates and in plastination we catch the body.

So if you believe the body dies two deaths, do you believe we have a soul?

Everything is possible. Unfortunately I don't have very much hope. It's unlikely that my soul will view my plastinate but if so I think it would very much enjoy it!

In *Body Worlds* many of the bodies are posed in artistic ways such as playing football or riding a horse. Is this disrespectful to the dead?

It is disrespectful to leave them stiff like in a death position because this was the feedback I had at my first ever exhibition, in Japan, where I put them in anatomical pose. I think I owe it to the body donors, and they like to be brought, at least in their pose, back to life. They are posing life and in this way the transfer

You've done a lot of work which breaks taboos and has invariably led to criticism. How do you deal with this?

Very, very easily. I would say no society would develop if there was no change of taboos. Actually not even change a taboo, I recreate taboos. I redemocratised anatomy. This has only been a taboo for the last 100 years when public anatomists moved into modern dissection rooms where the public have no access.

Would you like to be plastinated when you die?

Certainly, as do my wife, my son, my father and many of our employees including Nadine my assistant. My father, who is 90, believes it is most appropriate that I dissect him in front of an audience. I will certainly plastinate him and do a complicated dissection on him.

When you did your television show *Anatomy for Beginners* you went through all the major systems of the body. Which is your favourite?

Well it's more a region of the body. The most impressive region of the body is the head. Head slices with brain and eyes and nose and all those many nerves. You know it's very complex anatomy in a very small, tiny space. Very difficult to understand, very challenging to make it visible. It's a real big task, I enjoy it so much it was actually one of the major reasons why I accepted the guest professorship at New York University Dental College.

In the UK the curricula of medical schools is changing: there's less anatomy teaching and dissection is being phased out. How do you feel about this?

I think I would hesitate to put my body in the hands of those doctors! You can learn it by prosections or computer programmes and it might be ok to do proper diagnosis, but you will be a very bad surgeon, you will be a very bad

orthopaedist. Your ideas about the body will certainly be wrong, like someone who doesn't understand the model of the car, but can still drive it. Not all countries dissect, but it's certainly better. I divide anatomists into book anatomists and corpse anatomists. There are many

mature anatomists who are book anatomists and think they know it all because they wrote a publication on it but when they dissect a corpse they are really not good because they think in pictures. After dissecting hundreds of bodies by myself and doing slices in three dimensions I am now able to dissect in my mind.

Having done so many dissections, are there any you particularly remember?

Yes, I'll give you two examples. One is my best friend who I dissected after a kidney tumour. I remember him reaching his arm across on the day of his death. The dissection took longer but it was good for mourning. Then I remember in about 1979, there was a lady, a body donor, who died from neurosurgery. She was very young, very beautiful. It was the 31st of December and I started in the afternoon and I remember at midnight I was down in the anatomy department injecting the polymer alone. Outside I heard the crying of the people and the rockets coming for the New

ed you in any way?

Well, I believe so, yes. Not so much that I have become more aware of death but that I encourage people to live healthier, watch their weight, get enough sleep, think of their health because I know more than them about how these things shorten their lifespan. And when you love people you

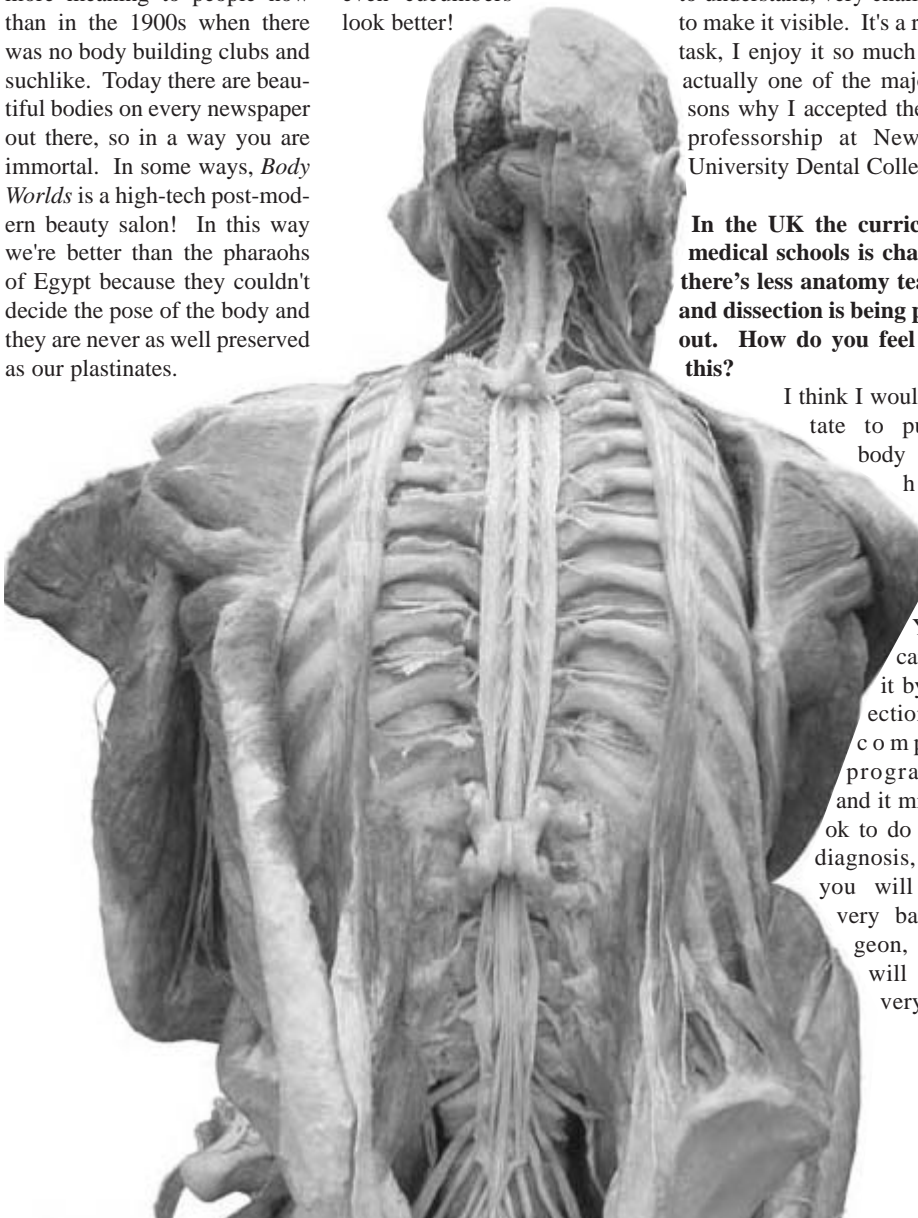


"I would hesitate to put my body in the hands of doctors who didn't learn dissection! Your ideas about the body will certainly be wrong."

So you're saying plastination will actually prevent this second form of death?

People at *Body Worlds* fear the body form of mortality less. The body orientated society of today means that the body has more meaning to people now than in the 1900s when there was no body building clubs and suchlike. Today there are beautiful bodies on every newspaper out there, so in a way you are immortal. In some ways, *Body Worlds* is a high-tech post-modern beauty salon! In this way we're better than the pharaohs of Egypt because they couldn't decide the pose of the body and they are never as well preserved as our plastinates.

of knowledge is much easier for those who visit. In this way it is highly respectful, it's disrespectful with the present knowledge of plastination and the possibility to cut the body in pieces to put them in jars where even cucumbers look better!



still speak better English and Russian. I constantly work on it, on airplanes or all the time in China. I can hold conversation in restaurants and in daily life. I am more in love with the characters because they are similar to anatomy!

We've talked a lot about your work but how do you relax?

I think this is a question for Nadine, she's my assistant, she knows me quite well.

Nadine: Well, he never really does, he plays the violin to give his mind some rest but that's about the only thing he does to take a break. Otherwise Gunther never goes on vacation, he considers that a waste of time. He totally lives for his job, he's as passionate about plastination as you can get, he never stops thinking about it. When we travel on the airplane, he looks at people and suddenly says "look at her, look at her cheekbones, oh how would the muscles look I wonder?" Even on a plane it's still on his mind!

Is your wife ok with you being so attached to your job?

We met in the dissection class so she totally accepts my passion for my job! But one thing, I would not say job. I am not in a job. What I do is a mission. I am on my mission everyday, I am on my mission when I wake up, it starts my mission, when I go to bed I dream about the mission. So rather than job, I would say mission.

He never stops thinking about it. When we travel on the airplane he looks at people and suddenly says "look at her, look at her cheekbones, oh how would the muscles look I wonder?"

Year and I was doing this anatomy work, face to face with death. It showed to me what I'd never realised before, the discrepancy between life on one side, outside, and inside the silence of contemplation and death. I felt much more safe and fine inside that I spent the night with her.

Has spending so much time face to face with death affect-

want them to have a long, capable and healthy life. This fits in with my way of life: I am not someone who enjoys big parties like other celebrities. I don't go out, I stay in with my books, I learn Chinese, and I look in my chemistry books.

How long have you been learning Chinese for?

About seven years now. I'm aiming to talk freely soon but I