

Addressing Vanessa

Usually typed as difficult, intense and media-shy, actor-activist Vanessa Redgrave drops her steely guard for Liz Thomson



Vanessa Redgrave worries that there are too few opportunities for today's young actors. This may seem ironic as she proudly watches the burgeoning careers of her own children, Joely and Natasha, and her niece, Jemma. But then irony is one of Redgrave's fortes.

"I was so pleased when my children got their first jobs," she says. "It's very much

tougher for them than it was for me. The younger generation has a tenth of our chances. Rep doesn't exist, for a start."

It was Britain's once-celebrated repertory theatre that gave Redgrave her start. Graduating, aged 20, from London's Central School of Speech and Drama in 1957 with the Sybil Thorndike Prize, she soon landed her first professional job in

Frinton, an old-fashioned seaside resort: 10 plays in 10 weeks, beginning with a comedy, *The Reluctant Debutante*.

In the 35 years since, she has played an astonishing variety of roles on stage and screen: Shakespeare, Chekhov, Agatha Christie, Noel Coward, Henry James and countless others.

Redgrave's eponymously titled autobiography has just been published in Britain and Australia. In London, she is starring with Paul Scofield and Felicity Kendal in a revival of Shaw's *Heartbreak House*. A new movie, a Merchant-Ivory realisation of the E.M. Forster novel *Howards End*, opens this month.

We are talking in a cramped, semi-basement dressing room to which Redgrave has added a few homey touches.

Playing herself, she seems vulnerable and fragile, shy even. Interviews with her are supposedly difficult, subject to contract with areas of discussion tightly defined. But we are talking about her autobiography, so there can be no preconditions - everything in the book is fair game and the conversation ranges widely, helped along by grape juice and numerous cig-

arettes...a habit for which she apologises. Few people have been more often misquoted, more misrepresented, more vilified than Vanessa Redgrave. Why? "It's because I'm a Trotskyist and some people are frightened of what I saw," she answers simply, smiling that famous, short-sighted smile.

arettes...a habit for which she apologises.

Few people have been more often misquoted, more misrepresented, more vilified than Vanessa Redgrave. Why? "It's because I'm a Trotskyist and some people are frightened of what I saw," she answers simply, smiling that famous, short-sighted smile.

Sacrifices: Her father, Sir Michael, suffered for such committed actions as signing of the People's Convention for a People's Government, and making records for the Workers' Music Association - and worried about his daughter's balancing of her dual lives, which she sees as inseparable. His concern was well-founded, for Redgrave acknowledges that she has lost prestigious and well-paid work... "It was thought I ought to be

grave could have led a glamorous life, placating her conscience with occasional fund-raisers, appearing as the token celebrity for fashionable causes. Yet she has chosen to be both actor and politician, pursuing both careers with similar intensity.

And intensity is surely the key to Vanessa. Think of blazing, blue-eyed Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*. "Why do you find it incredible?" she asks, by way of answering a question about her "incredible intensity". "It's true, I know of no other way," she finally agrees. Does she have any hobbies? She stares hard at the floor. "Well, I have two tomato plants - I don't know if that counts!" Does she ever relax and do nothing? "No - never ever ever. All the influences on my life have made me think I'd be wasting my time if I didn't open my eyes and see what's to be done. I've had that feeling as long as I can remember. The more human beings engage in, the more human they become."

An essentially private person whose life is too often viewed through the distorting lens of tabloid sensationalism, Red-

"Mad, bad, dangerous" Vanessa Redgrave
Left: With Emma Thompson (on left) in *Howards End*. Below: With Glenda Jackson (on left) in *Mary, Queen of Scots*



DERRICK SANTINI

grave is generally portrayed as mad, bad and dangerous to know. Her memoirs, which she has been working on sporadically "for years and years", are in part an exercise in setting the record straight, though that seems a secondary concern. "I've learned so much when other actors have written about their life and work, the problems they encounter, the solutions

taught a lesson. Otherwise other artists might start speaking their minds, too." But such lessons have gone unheeded. "I've always been ready to make sacrifices, because I was taught one must be ready to sacrifice all sorts of things to do great works."

With her acting ability - rarely denied, even by her political detractors - Red-

grave is generally portrayed as mad, bad and dangerous to know. Her memoirs, which she has been working on sporadically "for years and years", are in part an exercise in setting the record straight, though that seems a secondary concern. "I've learned so much when other actors have written about their life and work, the problems they encounter, the solutions

they've found. Really, in a sense, it's a sharing of what I've learned along the way." Consciously and unconsciously, she learned a great deal from her parents, and from their friends and colleagues - not least Laurence Olivier. She recalls late-night talks after family outings to the theatre: "My Mum would always make scrambled eggs and we'd discuss the play. That was my first experience of analysing, and I learned an awful lot that way."

It was a happy and secure childhood, even in wartime evacuation, when she and brother Corin were thrown back on each other's company, reading and playing at theatre together. But two events seem to have shaped her life: the burning of Coventry, watched from her bedroom window, and the loss of a favourite uncle. "When I was four, the impact of knowing how far away Coventry was, of seeing the whole sky red - it made me know that the world I was living in had another side to it. And that was really brought home by [uncle] Robin, presumed killed in action."

Perhaps it's not so surprising that, 50 years on, she opposed the war with Iraq - not from support for Saddam Hussein (she was "unconditionally opposed" to his Kuwait invasion), but because she feared for the young, the old, the dispossessed who

would suffer further deprivation from the conflict. These views outraged sister Lynn, with whom she was working at in *Three Sisters*, but Vanessa has more often found support from those closest to her.

Men: And it says a great deal for her that she has remained on good terms with her life's leading men: Tony Richardson, her ex-husband and father of Joely and Natasha, who died last year; Franco Nero, who played Lancelot to her Guinevere in *Camelot* and is the father of her son, Carlo; and lately, Timothy Dalton.

Does she ever get discouraged? "No, I don't. Frustrated, angry," Redgrave concedes, praising those artists of eastern Europe who are "like a beacon to us all". Twice in the book she quotes Tennessee Williams's aphorism, that happiness is insensitivity. "I'll always remember that and it comes out of that

man's continuous sensitivity," she explains, smiling at her memories of him.

"I don't think he meant that nobody could ever be happy. He meant that a state of happiness as opposed to a moment of happiness...well, you'd have to be someone indifferent."

Which is the last thing you would say of Vanessa Redgrave. ■