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Diana Rigg's *Medea*

BY GERARD RAYMOND

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Eclectic/Electric

Diana Rigg's range extends from sex kittens
the classics—with a little Sondheim on the side

BY GERARD RAYMOND

I suppose Medea should be played by a younger woman, but it is traditionally played by older women, and for good reason, says Diana Rigg, who is currently playing the role at the Longacre Theater on Broadway. "It requires a vast amount, technically and emotionally, and that only comes with years of practice," she explains. Her performance as Medea, for which she received the Evening Standard award and a nomination for a Laurence Olivier award, is widely acknowledged the best of her eclectic career to date.

Over the past 34 years Rigg has acquired that skill and experience she says is needed to play Medea. She has journeyed from promising young classical star of the Royal Shakespeare Company to television sex symbol, from being a consummate interpreter of Tom Stoppard and Stephen Sondheim to the elegant television host of PBS's *Mystery!* series. Along the way she raised a daughter, compiled a book of critical pans, and survived two divorces, a flop television series, and a Broadway-bound musical that closed in Denver. Now at 55, Rigg is ready to claim her place among Britain's leading classical actresses.

In Euripides's classic Greek tragedy, Medea vows vengeance on Jason, the husband who has deserted her. Overcome with fury, she murders Jason's new wife and slays her own children. Her hair severely scraped back against her head and her eyes flashing, Rigg's Medea is a devastating combination of fire and ice. In the final moments of the play, she stands tall, and shows no remorse, even though she is shattered by her actions. Drenched in her children's blood, she challenges the people of Corinth, and us, the audience, to accept the inevitability of her horrific deed.



Diana Rigg in a scene from *Medea*. Ivan Kyncl

Offstage, Rigg is no less a commanding presence. Sipping a cocktail in a London hotel, the husky-voiced actress is cool and professional. Although it's 30 years since her long legs and slinky black leather outfits set hearts pounding in the British television series, *The Avengers*, she still exudes an aura of sex appeal and glamour. An ironic smile which flickers at the corner, her lips conveys intelligence and wit.

Rigg says she made the pursuit of experience the priority in her career. That's what prompted her to sign on for *The Avengers* although she was being heralded as one of the most promising newcomers of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The Helena of Peter Hall's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Cordelia of Peter Brook's *King Lear* became Emma Peel, the undercover cop who dispatched villains with a well-aimed karate-chop.

"They thought I was profligate with my talent," she recalls. "But fair is fair: They had also invested three years training me within the company, so I suppose they saw

it as a waste.' But as though to prove that she was not going to be pigeonholed in any one medium, Rigg returned to the Shakespeare repertory to give a much lauded performance as Viola in *Twelfth Night* after her first *Avengers* season.

Prior to *Medea*, one didn't necessarily associate Rigg with the great classical roles; those parts were the domain of her peers, particularly that impressive triumvirate of contemporary English actresses, Vanessa Redgrave, Judi Dench, and Glenda Jackson. 'I didn't pay my dues,' says Rigg, simply. But back in the '70s, you might have thought she was embarked on a career that rivaled those of any of her illustrious contemporaries.

Abelard and Heloise, which generated a controversy for its nude love scene, transferred to Broadway from the West End, bringing Rigg her first Tony nomination in 1971. At the National Theater she gave a series of acclaimed performances including those of Dottie the pop singer in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* and Célimène, Molière's "baited barb of beauty," in *The Misanthrope*. She earned a second Tony nomination for the latter when the production transferred to Broadway in 1975. In

1978 she starred in Stoppard's *Night and Day*, creating the role that Maggie Smith was to play in its short-lived New York transfer. (Rigg didn't travel to New York on account of her newborn daughter, Rachel.)

She dropped out of sight in the early '80s, taking the time off to raise her daughter. As a consequence, she stopped getting offers for work. "It's hard for women to get the balance between their lives and careers right," she observes. 'Often there is a casualty; it's either the career or the child. I preferred that the casualty was my career.' But the fallow period ended when Jonathan Kent, of the Almeida Theater [see box], asked her to play Cleopatra in John Dryden's *All for Love* in 1991.

In the meantime, Rigg had traveled to America typically pursuing yet another new experience: the musical. Unfortunately her musical stage debut, the 1982 *Colette* by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, was stillborn and never reached Broadway. She gamely shoulders the responsibility for the fiasco, saying she wasn't terribly good at the time. 'I don't consider myself a singer. I am somebody who interprets songs,' she says, adding

The Almeida Theater

Although non-musical productions are an endangered species in the commercial theater, productions of Euripides's *Medea*, Terrence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*, and two plays by Harold Pinter (*Moonlight* and *No Man's Land*) scored successes last year in the London West End. All four productions originated at the Almeida Theater.

The Almeida, which is classified as a Fringe Theater, is located in the North London borough of Islington. Recently it has emerged as a major player on the London theater scene, a full time producing organization capable of feeding the West End and, now, Broadway. The little theater's remarkable success story began four years ago with the appointment of two actors, Jonathan Kent and Ian McDiarmid, as joint artistic directors. Since its inaugural production, Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution* starring Glenda Jackson in 1990, the Almeida has produced a series of European classics and premiered several new works, most notably Pin-

ter's first full-length play in 15 years. On the cards for next year is a touring production of *Hamlet* starring Ralph Fiennes of *Schindler's List* fame, which Jonathan Kent will direct.

Actress Diana Rigg says that 'everything is in the right place' at the Almeida and "the text comes first over anything else.' Almeida Theater productions are also distinguished by superior production values and high standards of acting. In their past four seasons Kent and McDiarmid have succeeded in attracting some of the best creative talents available to their 300-seat theater: directors Nicholas Hytner, Andrei Serban, David Leveaux, and Karel Reisz; designers Mark Thompson, Bob Crowley, and Maria Bjornson; performers Ian Holm, Alan Bates, Claire Bloom, and Janet Suzman. The Almeida's choice of plays has included works by Racine, Moliere, Anouilh, Pirandello, and Brecht in addition to more intrepid choices of young American writers such as Han Ong and Phyllis Nagy.—G.R.

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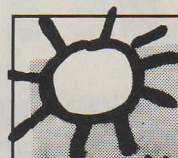
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quickly, "I don't mean that to sound very grand. I have to say that because I don't make the beautiful sounds that singers make.

Rigg's voice, however, is perfectly suited for those songs of irony and pain in which Stephen Sondheim specializes. I, for one, won't easily forget her acerbic rendition of "Could I Leave You?" in the 1987 London revival of *Follies*. Her next musical venture is already creating a buzz of excitement. Her fans can't wait to see her getting "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" over the young hustler in the National Theater production of *Pal Joey* scheduled for next spring.

Back to the classics: With the success of the Dryden play at the Almeida, Rigg and director Jonathan Kent decided to look for a follow-up project; they independently hit on *Medea*. Rigg was confident that she was now well equipped intellectually and emotionally to take on the role. *Medea* can be clever, manipulative, and charming, even as she plots her terrible revenge, notes the actress. Indeed, in this production, she is even sardonically funny, but *Medea's* emotional trajectory follows through logically. Rigg points out that Euripides makes certain the audience understands that the character is not mad. Quoting a key line from the play—"the rage of my heart is stronger than my reason"—Rigg says *Medea's* tragedy is that she fully understands the implications of what she is compelled to do.

The physical demands of playing the role are not unlike climbing a mountain every night, says Rigg. *Medea's* passion and energy drive the full 90 minutes of the evening, and the actress must supply that drive. "It's like being a marathon runner," Rigg explains. "You have to husband your strength and be very careful not to tire yourself during the day; you must eat at the right time, because it is hopeless going on stage with a full stomach."

In a strange way, destiny seems to have finally caught up with Diana Rigg. That promising newcomer of 1960 has lived up to her potential, despite—or more likely because of—*The Avengers* and all the other blips in her career along the way. Does she have any second thoughts about her TV sex symbol days? "Goodness, no. It catapulted me [to fame] instantly. How many years would it take me to play to the numbers of people that I played to on television? A lifetime." TW