

Famous English Actress Seeks Adventure

Joan Plowright plays Eastern European matrons and a murderous housewife.

by Gerard Raymond

“THERE ARE FEW CLASSICAL OR MODERN plays in England that travel. Until the next new play comes, which hopefully will be written soon, I don't suppose you will see me here on stage,” declares Tony Award-winning English actress Joan Plowright during a visit to New York last month. Until such time we will have to be content with this great actress's film performances, the latest of which is Peter Greenaway's *Drowning by Numbers*, currently in release around the country.

In the film Plowright plays a grandmother named Cissie who starts off a bizarre trend by murdering her husband. In the course of Greenaway's stylish black comedy, the elder Cissie's daughter and granddaughter (also named Cissie) casually kill their own husbands as well. After each homicide, however, each woman displays a moment of great sadness and grieving for her dead spouse. It's a moving metaphor, Plowright believes, for the strange and impulsive things we do in life and for which we then feel remorse.

“I look for something that is challenging, a little bit out of the ordinary. A role that hopefully I can bring something to which a hundred others couldn't—otherwise it may as well be one of those other hundred doing it,” Plowright explains. Peter Greenaway, who followed *Drowning By Numbers* with the controversial *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, has a talent for the unusual which the actress finds exciting. “You know, boredom sets in when there is predictability. If you are never astounded, surprised, alarmed, it becomes a very ordinary and very unstretching experience.”

Given her zest for acting adventure, it's not surprising that Plowright first captured the attention of the London theater world playing an eight-year-old cabin boy



Joan Plowright

in Orson Welles's 1955 production of *Moby-Dick*. Plowright, who was 26 at the time, had made her London debut the previous year in the Julian Slade musical, *The Duenna*.

“Orson Welles dreamed up this project of a traveling theater company rehearsing *King Lear*, which we did for about five minutes. It was the turn of the century, we were all in late-18th-century costumes, and a messenger came in with a whole pile of scripts saying a new play had come through that morning called *Moby-Dick*. So Orson, who was the head of this group of actors, handed out this script giving everybody parts to play. I was playing Cordelia to his *Lear* and I was told I had to play the mad Negro cabin boy. It was a tremendously improvised thing—a setting on a bare stage with only tea chests and the electricians ladder for the captain's bridge and lighting and sound effects to conjure up the ocean. Oh, that was an extraordinary adventure!”

Plowright's stunning 1958 New York debut at the Phoenix Theater in the early off-Broadway days was no less ordinary. In a celebrated double bill of Ionesco's *The Chairs* and *The Lesson* she aged from 17 to 94 in a single evening. “It was a great opportunity for a young actress like me,” she recalls with glee. “You have to be the sort of talent that enjoys that challenge and can cope with it.” A month later she made her Broadway debut playing Archie Rice's daughter in John Osborne's *The Entertainer*, a part she had originated at the Royal Court in London. This was the play, of course, which revitalized the late Laurence Olivier's career and brought the two of them together.

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Like Plowright, Olivier delighted in disappearing into his roles. “When we first met and fell in love Larry said we seem to share a passion for disguise.” Olivier had pointed out that this was not so prevalent among women. “Male actors like doing that but on the whole the women like to remain who they are and what they are, looking as beautiful as possible. They didn't care to stretch into all these odd-looking creatures that I seem to want to do.” Plowright explains she has performed the “usual sort of thing”—Shakespeare heroines at the National Theater—but “to be able to do something that needs an extraordinary stretch of imagination and an extraordinary stretch of one's abili-

ties" is what has always tempted her.

She won a Best Actress Tony Award for her role as the pregnant teenager in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* in 1961 but did not return to Broadway until two decades later to play the title role in Eduardo de Filippo's *Filumena* under Olivier's direction.

Although she was married to the most celebrated English actor of this century, Lady Olivier maintained her own acclaimed career as Joan Plowright. Did they have any problems, working in the theater together? "There was no question of rivalry or jealousy," Plowright answers. "In any case we were not likely to be after the same parts," she laughs. "He was already world famous, he didn't need to worry. He could only be happy when I had big successes."

Plowright has just completed a run of J.B. Priestley's *Time and the Conways*, which played in London as well as Toronto. The production was noteworthy for being her first stage appearance since Olivier's death in 1989. The Priestley play was directed by their son Richard Olivier, and became something of a family celebration due to the presence of their two daughters in the cast as well.

Last year Plowright appeared in two films, *I Love you to Death* and *Avalon*, playing Eastern or Central European matriarchs. "I think it is a total coincidence that I am doing more films at the moment. I've enjoyed making them enormously and they have been more interesting projects than just doing another classic at the National Theater."

Her next theater project will actually be a classic at the National, de Rojas's *Celestina* which was postponed when Olivier died. This Spanish classic is the kind of play that can be mounted in a subsidized environment, but hardly likely to make its way across the Atlantic. So will someone please write a play with a part for an adventurous lady in her early 60s? It's time Joan Plowright returned to the New York stage. □

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