

Britain's Best-Kept Secret

Eileen Atkins Comes to the Manhattan Theater Club with *Prin*

by Gerard Raymond



Gerry Goodstein

Eileen Atkins and Amy Wright in Andrew Davies's *Prin*.

“I don't have the bone-structure,” Eileen Atkins once replied to a journalist who asked her why she wasn't as famous as her contemporaries, Glenda Jackson, Vanessa Redgrave, and Maggie Smith.

“It does sound conceited,” Atkins told *Theater Week* in an interview at her home in London a few months ago. “You might think, ‘maybe she's just not as talented.’ But I feel I didn't have the right face and I also lacked single-minded determination.” She laughs. “You see, I was always side-tracked by men.”

Atkins, like Judi Dench, is one of those superb British actresses—now in their fifties—who are relatively unknown in the U.S. If you have not yet seen Atkins onstage, then make haste to the Manhattan Theater Club where she plays the title character in *Prin* (short for Principal).

The play premiered in London last year with Sheila Hancock in the role. Luckily Atkins did not see that production. “I almost can't play a role if I have seen anybody else in it before me. Even if I saw the performance years ago, I remember intona-

tions, and I find it very difficult to get rid of that person.”

Atkins explained her initial attraction to the role: “I thought that it must be one of the best parts written for a woman in her fifties in a very long time. It sounds so boring to go on about it, but just when men in their fifties are muscling up to tackle fabulous parts, the women are. . . we are all in the same boat. I mean, do you think Maggie [Smith] would do *Letting Go* for three years if there were other parts?”

“I have been asked to do *The Cherry Orchard* about four times and I think, ‘Oh God, does anyone really want to see another *Cherry Orchard*?’ because that's the part everybody is doing, or *The Seagull*. And you think, well, Vanessa [Redgrave] has done that, so forget it!”

There are practically no parts for middle-aged actresses in Shakespeare, Atkins noted. She had a rare opportunity of playing one of the better middle-aged parts, Paulina, in Sir Peter Hall's National Theater production of *The Winter's Tale* in 1988. “A man can play Macbeth till he is about sixty, but everybody insists that Lady Macbeth can't be older than about 32. There is only one old part in Shakespeare that I'd like to play, the countess in *All's Well that Ends Well*. I have turned down Gertrude, and who wants to play Volumnia [*Coriolanus*]?” Referring to the recent National production of *Hamlet*, Atkins added, “If Judi Dench is playing Gertrude, you know there is something terribly wrong with parts for women.”

One of the reasons Atkins is not well known in this country is that she has not made many films,

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Ivan Kyncl

Eileen Atkins in the National Theater production of *Mountain Language*.

although she did appear in *Equus* and *The Dresser*. "Agents were so violently rude to me when I was young and I didn't have that sort of arrogance to think, well, fuck you, I think I look terrific. Now that I am older, it doesn't matter, since we all play mums and grandmothers."

Another reason for her anonymity here, as she explained, is her own attitude towards her work. "I was very much a roamer when I was young. I didn't want to be pinned down by anyone or anything. I wouldn't even have a potted plant because I would have to water it and be somewhere."

Her lack of determination to pursue a career resulted in her getting passed over for a part in Ken Russell's *Women in Love*, the film that made Glenda Jackson's international reputation in 1969. Atkins was up to play Jackson's sister in the film. "I have always been very honest about my age and when Ken Russell asked me how old I was, I

said 32. Apparently the character was 28 and the producer was furious that I had not lied. Because of this, they said I would now have to test for the part."

At the time, Atkins was involved with an American who lived in San Francisco. When she didn't hear from the producer within 24 hours, she left England to go there. "Then I got a call asking me to come back and test but I refused, saying that I was now in California. I was so convinced I wouldn't get it anyway and so I just didn't do it."

Atkins's restless nature has brought her across the Atlantic many times. She made her Broadway debut in 1966 in *The Killing of Sister George*, repeating the role she created in London, and got a Tony nomination for Best Actress. She was nominated again in 1972, for her portrayal of Elizabeth I in Robert Bolt's *Vivat! Vivat! Regina!*,

a role she also originated in London. She played the *Duchess of Malfi* at the Mark Taper in 1976, and grabbed at a second chance to play Rosalind in *As you Like it* at Stratford, Connecticut, under Michael Kahn. "I had made such a balls-up of the part in Stratford [Upon Avon] with the RSC that I was thrilled to do it again."

But working in the U.S. regional theater may have had an adverse effect on her career at home, without enhancing her reputation here. "I lost out a bit in England by spending so much time in America. When I first returned home some years ago, somebody said to me, 'you can't mess about and have a good time all the time in America, you've just got to be a good girl, otherwise England will never forgive you.' Well I came back, and I was a very good girl, and worked my ass off, you know—very involved with a company, giving classes, everything. But although I

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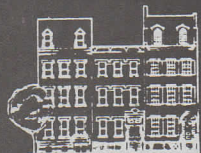
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like company work, in the end, if you are an actor, you need the parts. I get my pleasure from the huge challenge."

Last year Atkins did get recognition at home, winning the 1988 Laurence Olivier award for Outstanding Performance in a Supporting Role for her brilliant work at the National—*The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*. In the latter, she created the role of the mute mountain woman, the part played by Jean Stapleton in the New York production. Atkins gave a poignant performance, aided immeasurably by her expressive face. "I happen to have the kind of face which gives messages quite well," Atkins acknowledged, adding "I also look more intelligent than I am. I am not an intellectual, and I think there is nothing wrong with pure entertainment sometimes."

She followed her much acclaimed stint at the National with an equally acclaimed one-woman show, *A Room of One's Own*, in which she played Virginia Woolf. The play was based on an lecture given by Woolf to the girls at Girton College in 1928. Then, almost in defiance of those who expected her to do another serious role, she refused an offer to take over in David Hare's *The Secret Rapture*, and signed on for Jeffrey Archer's *Exclusive* in the West End instead.

"People said, 'Oh Eileen, you can't do *Jeffrey Archer*.' I hate that attitude. Why can't I do Jeffrey Archer? He writes entertaining stuff. I don't read it, but why should I be snotty-nosed about it? And I thought it was a bit of fun. I don't think that every time I get up on the stage I've got to give a message of some sort. But, then, we did not do the script that we accepted. They tried to up-market it, and Archer was forced to change the script." *Exclusive*, with a high-profile cast that included Paul Scofield and Alec McCowen, became the most notorious flop of the season—mercilessly torn apart by the critics.

Immediately after our interview, Atkins was going back to work on a

new television series she is co-creating with Jean Marsh. The two of them were responsible for the 1971 Edwardian-era series, *Upstairs, Downstairs*. She and Marsh were working out the story lines for each episode in the new series. "I am very much an ideas person. But I don't think I can write dialogue—that would mean giving up acting for the whole of this year. I can adapt, and I do things like getting letters together, but I don't actually create. I haven't got anything I am actually dying to say. Well I have, but I say it immediately to people. I get very angry for two minutes, and then I forget it."

In 1977, Alec Guinness warned Atkins, "Eileen, you played a dyke a few years ago and then a virgin queen: You mustn't go to any parties without a man on your arm." This did not stop her from playing Mrs. Strindberg's lesbian lover in *The Night of the Tribades* opposite Bibi Andersen in the 1977 Broadway production. Now, fourteen years after she played Childie—a young woman who was bullied and terrorized by her lover, Sister George—Atkins is back in New York, once again cast as a lesbian.

"I know, it's quite funny, isn't it? When *Sister George* went on and on, and I was nearly dying of boredom towards the end, I used to think this was going to be my life. I was playing Childie, then I was going to play Sister George for years, and then I would play Mrs. Mercy [an older lesbian in the play] for years and then, in great age, I would play the tiny part of the clairvoyant. I thought I'd never do another play!"

Atkins, who turned 56 this month, has no regrets about the way her career has turned out. "I honestly don't think there is anything that I have missed. I don't have parts that I want to play, because I think you are usually rotten in those anyway. It's odd, the things you are often good at, like playing Virginia [Woolf], are roles you didn't want to do at all. I never wanted to do a one-woman show, but it turned out to be the thing I most enjoyed." □