

# TheaterWeek

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## Natasha Takes Manhattan

BY GERARD RAYMOND

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# Natasha Takes Manhattan

How the actress became the talk of the town.

By Gerard Raymond



Richardson in *Anna Christie*. Terry O'Neill

After a stunning Broadway debut in Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* and a mesmerizing TV performance in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, Natasha Richardson is the talk of New York. Until recently, her reputation in this country rested on movies like *Patty Hearst* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. But by taking on two of America's greatest playwrights, the 29-year-old English actress has established herself as a major talent on this side of the Atlantic.

It is hard to write about Natasha Richardson without mentioning her famous relatives, including her mother, Vanessa Redgrave, whom Richardson resembles most strikingly. So let's start with her remarkable theatrical pedigree and get it out of the way: Her late grandfather was the renowned British actor, Sir Michael Redgrave, and her grandmother, Rachel Kempson, is an actress. Her uncle Corin Redgrave (and his daughter Jemma), her aunt Lynn Redgrave, and her younger sister Joely are all actors as well. Her late father, Tony Richardson, is famous for his direction of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court in the late '50s, and of the Oscar-winning movie *Tom Jones*. No wonder that the English tabloid press delights in calling the clan the Royal Family of British Theater.

"That royal family stuff makes me want to laugh, because it is such a ridiculous conception," Richardson says during our conversation at the Algonquin Hotel, one week before the opening of *Anna Christie*. "When I think of the house that I was brought up in, you can't get further away from the Royal Family or even most middle class families than that!"

Nevertheless, it was a family in which she inevitably gravitated towards acting. Besides having the usual love for dressing up, singing along to records, and doing little plays, the young Richardson often visited her parents when they were making movies. She decided then that movie sets were the most magical places in the world. "I fell in love with it, and that's all I wanted to do," she says.

Tony Richardson encouraged young Natasha's interest in films. When she was very little, he bounced her on his knees, and said: "Movies! Movies! Movies!" And when she was a toddler, he cast as her as her mother's bridesmaid in his film *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. As she grew older and became more serious about an acting career, her parents (who were separated by this time) recommended she audition for drama school. She did, and landed a spot at London's Central School for Speech and Drama, where her mother

had studied 25 years earlier.

"You can't underestimate how much will and strength of character it took for Tash to forge a body of work that is absolutely to do with her, without burnishing her image on the back of her mother," says David Leveaux, who directed her in *Anna Christie*.

At first, Richardson steered clear of acting with family members. But in 1986, she found herself playing alongside her mother when a fringe production of *The Seagull* Natasha was in transferred to the West End, and Vanessa Redgrave replaced Samantha Eggar as Arkadina.

Comparisons between the two actresses were inevitable. "It comes from other people and I did resent the focus put on it," Richardson says. She recalls an incident where someone in the audience came out during the intermission saying, "She sounds just like her mother. I suppose she is imitating her." Richardson laughs (it's a full-throated gurgle that, if you close your eyes, you would swear is coming from Vanessa Redgrave), and says: "Well of course, I sound like her. I'm her daughter!"

But more seriously, Richardson says the high standards set by her mother's and her grandfather's work have pushed her to expect a lot of herself. She acknowledges being heavily influenced by Redgrave. "She is always so unbelievably truthful and brave," says the daughter.

Recalling her first day on *The Seagull* with her mother, Richardson says Redgrave "just threw herself into this wholeheartedly. She was all over the place, up, down, sideways, and over the top, very real, everything. It was like a whirlwind and I felt flattened."

Richardson has since incorporated some of her mother's passion into her own acting. "I think Tash takes enormous risks," says David Leveaux, who has also directed her mother. "They have the same phenomenal concentration, combined with a periodic sense that they have gone completely AWOL—except they haven't. They are just putting things together."



Natasha Richardson and Liam Neeson in *Anna Christie*. Carol Rosegg/Martha Swope

Says Richardson: "If you don't let go, then you can't surprise yourself or anyone else, either. That is what is exciting and dangerous about theater and film."

Richardson resolved to play Anna Christie immediately after reading the play. She connected with the role—a 20-year-old woman hardened from being forced into prostitution, but whose cynical veneer hides a vulnerable child. "I just feel for her anger, her loneliness and despair, and her bravery. The other thing is that I'm someone who works from here," she says, indicating her heart, "rather than from here," pointing to her head. "I love writing that isn't afraid of emotion and passion. Full-bodied stuff, rather than dry and intellectual."

Richardson was the impetus behind the London production of *Anna Christie*. She took the play to David Thacker, artistic director of London's Young Vic. Within 24 hours, he'd agreed to direct her in it. *Anna Christie* opened in London in 1990. Richardson received excellent notices and the London Theater Critics Award for her performance. Her sights, however, were

on New York.

"I desperately wanted to do theater here because it is my adopted city, and I love it here," she explains. "I think London has become a very jaded city in terms of theater, but in New York, people still get a buzz about it."

That's debatable—especially since it took almost three years for *Anna Christie* to get here. But Richardson persevered and eventually persuaded Todd Haimen to mount the show at the Roundabout Theater Company. And she and the Roundabout succeeded in securing Liam Neeson to play Mat, the shipwrecked sailor who falls in love with Anna.

In a similar manner, Richardson initiated the television production of *Suddenly Last Summer*. According to National Theater Director Richard Eyre, Richardson and her husband, producer Robert Fox, first enlisted Maggie Smith for the part of Mrs. Venable. They then approached Eyre to direct the play as a stage production. He refused, mostly because of scheduling conflicts at the National. But when Fox got the backing of the BBC,

Eyre agreed to direct it for television.

"I admire the way [Natasha] is proactive," says Eyre. "Unlike a lot of actors who sit at home and ask, 'Why doesn't the phone ring?' she says, 'I want to work. I want to do good parts.'"

Just as admirable as her determination to generate her own work is her astute choice of roles. Of course, both Anna Christie and Catharine in *Suddenly Last Summer* are tremendous opportunities for a young actress to showcase her talents. But, as David Leveaux points out, these are roles outside the usual repertoire of the English classical actress. Richardson's contemporaries in England are faced with a superb but endless recital of Ibsen, Chekhov, and maybe Strindberg heroines. But Richardson has gone beyond European playwrights to explore American writers like O'Neill and Williams—dramatists who brought the tradition of the great 19th-century heroines into the 20th century.

"Tash has a wonderful range," says Leveaux. "You feel a connection with the late 1890s, and at the same time you feel it is extraordinarily contemporary."



Richardson with Rob Lowe in the television production of *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Although the two directors were selected by their leading actress, rather than the other way round, both David Leveaux and Richard Eyre cannot stop singing Richardson's praises. Leveaux says it never occurred to him that he was "coming on board a moving train" to direct a star who had played the role before in another production. "I was very glad to be cast," he jokes. "She is very direct, and you can be direct with her." At no point, he says, was there any feeling that Richardson was the star who was calling the shots. "She is not grand in any way. But she is a star, though, in the sense that she is deadly serious and doesn't suffer mediocrity. And why should she?"

"I adore her," says Richard Eyre, who first directed the actress in an ill-conceived stage adaptation of *High Society* in the West End. "Natasha is an exemplary worker and is always prepared. I have

never known her to resist a suggestion. I mean she will debate it, but she is touching in the way that, even if she thinks it is wrong, she will try it."

Everyone connected with *High Society* knew the show wasn't working, but Eyre recalls Richardson being "remarkably resilient, good-willed, and optimistic." In fact, she was the only person who emerged from the production unscathed, receiving warm notices for her incarnation of Tracy Lord.

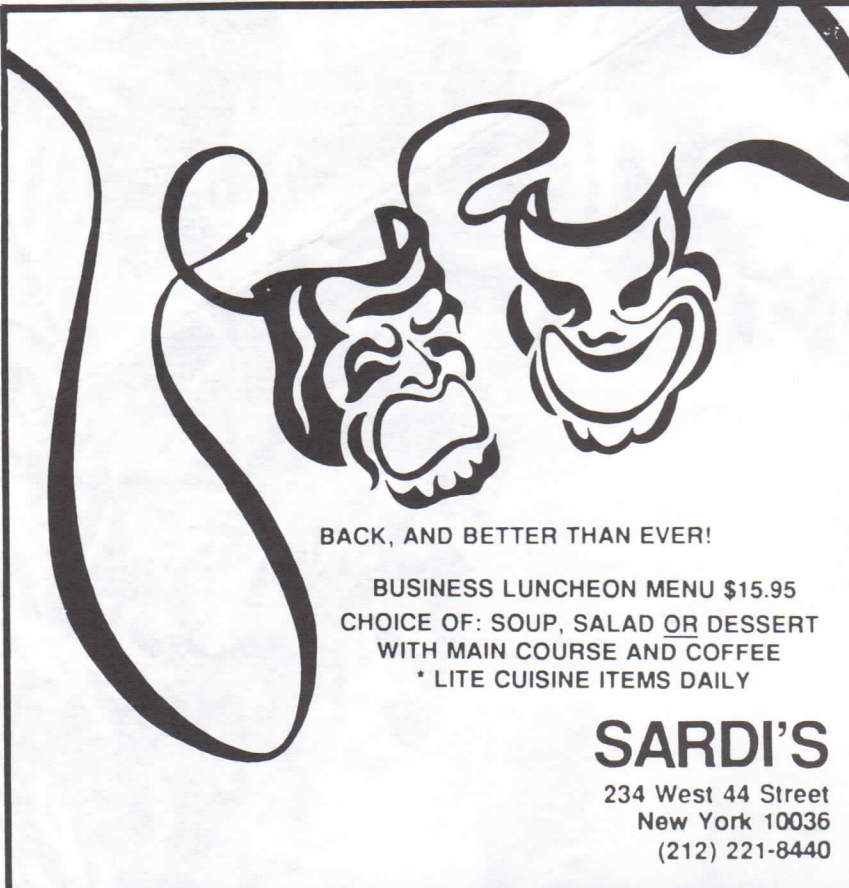
In the past few years, Richardson has noticeably stayed away from playing Shakespeare. Why? Well, for one thing, she says, there are few outlets to do Shakespeare for short runs in London, and she is not willing to spend a year or two at the Royal Shakespeare Company. But she also has very strong ideas about playing Shakespeare. To her mind, she has

seen only two people speak Shakespeare "as though they were making it up but keeping all the poetry," which, she adds, is the way she would like to do it. One is her mother, and the other was Gwen Ffranco-Davies, a revered grand dame of the theater, who died recently at the age of 100.

"I think there is almost too much Shakespeare in England," Richardson continues, "and I don't see the point of doing museum theater. It has to be really alive."

She adds quickly: "I want to say also that I don't want to do it because I am frightened I can't do it, not because I think I can and nobody else does. I'd have to learn how to do it."

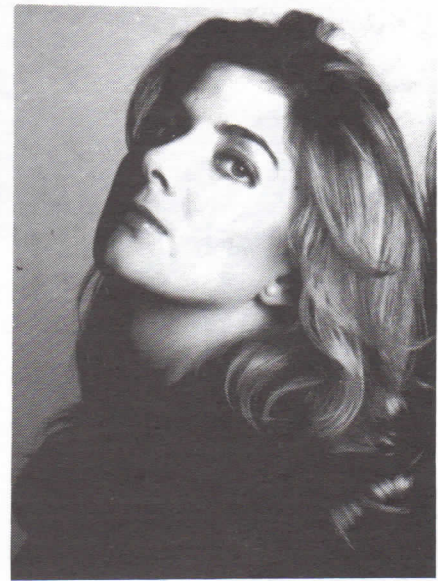
The conversation turns to her film career, which Richardson pursues as actively as her stage career. Her first film,



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Richardson as Patty Hearst.

Ken Russell's *Gothic*, brought her to the attention of Paul Schrader, who promptly cast her in *Patty Hearst*—over the objections of the producers who wanted him to test American actresses for the role. Volker Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Schrader's *The Comfort of Strangers* (both scripted by Harold Pinter) followed. Richardson went after—but didn't get—lead roles in *The Sheltering Sky* and *Dangerous Liaisons*.

But what she really wants to do is a musical movie. And if, as rumor has it, Kevin Costner remakes *Camelot*, she says the fact that her mother played Guenevere in the original film won't deter her from going after the role in a remake.

To date, her film performances have all been critically well received. But the movies she's been in have not made her a bankable commodity in Hollywood. "I want to be in a big hit for all the obvious reasons—for all the freedom, the choice of roles, and everything that any other actor will say to you," she says. "But there is a price I am not prepared to pay for that. I will not sit by a pool in Los Angeles waiting."

The discussion about movies and Los Angeles lead us to talk about her father, who moved to California in the '70s to make movies. Last November, at the age of 64, he died of AIDS. Richardson feels the loss every day. "We were very close and I just miss him terribly," she says. "He was sick for a while, and I nursed him, but I didn't know he was going to die. I don't know how much you can prepare yourself for that. And, you know, he was such a lion of a man. He gave me so much."

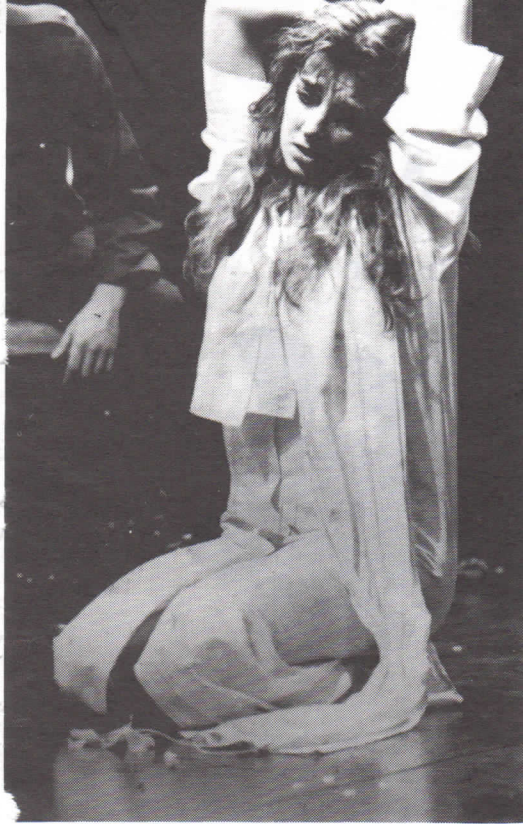
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Natasha Richardson as Ophelia in *Hamlet* at the Young Vic. David Cooper

People who have worked with Richardson remark on her warm, generous, and nurturing personality. According to Richard Eyre, she is always the person who is washing up, tidying up, and feeding people. Some of this can be traced back to her childhood, when she got used to cooking for the rest of her family. "There were all sorts of wonderful things [at home]," she says, but because of her parents' work schedules, "a stable routine of food on the table at 6:00 o'clock wasn't there. So I would dream about this Wal-tonesque family lifestyle and try and create that."

Two years ago Richardson married Robert Fox, the producer. Like her, he comes from a distinguished theatrical family. His elder siblings are the actors James and Edward Fox.

And what about establishing a theatrical dynasty of her own? "I definitely want to have a family, but not right now," says Richardson. "I don't feel quite unselfish enough and I don't feel quite grown-up enough."

Truth to tell, Natasha Richardson is intensely driven by a need to act at the moment. "I don't feel as complete, as fulfilled, as special, or as sexy when I am not working," she says. "I really love my job. When it is good, it is the best job in the world."

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