The Prime of Dame Diana

Diana Rigg on *Phèdre*, Emma Peel, and how her life did *not* inspire a hit play.

By Gerard Raymond

At 60, Dame Diana Rigg is enjoying a remarkable second flowering of her four-decade career. In the past decade, she has taken on some of the best parts for women in the western canon from Medea to Mother Courage — and has been rewarded with numerous accolades, including the 1994 Tony and the 1996 Evening Standard Awards for Best Actress. I'm a bit nervous as I approach Dame Diana's dressing room at London's Albery Theatre this November evening. Tonight, she's playing the lead in Racine's *Phèdre*, the Almeida Theatre production which paired with another Racine tragedy, *Britannicus* — will play in repertory at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theater January 5-17 A formidable force on stage, Rigg is known to have a cordial dislike for journalists. To make matters worse, due to a miscommunication about the date of the interview, I had accidentally stood her up the previous evening.

IVAN KYNCL

Rigg in the Almeida Theatre's *Phèdre*.

But Rigg is graciousness itself, brushing aside the mix-up with the dates. She has a grande dame quality mixed with a pragmatic, down-to-earth manner which, combined with her obvious intelligence and that husky voice, is irresistibly charming. With her famous cheekbones and elegant poise, she cuts an attractive figure as she relaxes on a couch near me.

Of course, I would probably not have been granted this interview if I were a woman, or if she thought I was from a tabloid newspaper. Rigg has declared that she finds female reporters "mean" because they play the "sisterhood card" to gain her confidence and then abuse it cynically in print. And, understandably, she refuses to talk to "grubbies," her word for the tabloids. Most recently, they had sniffed blood when Rigg's second marriage foundered and her husband (whom she later divorced) embarked on a relationship with Joely Richardson, younger daughter of her contemporary, Vanessa Redgrave. Since that dirt has already been dished in the British press, I could happily steer clear of the taboo subject of her personal life. (During the one moment near the end of the interview when I felt I might be sliding into dangerous territory, the actress preempted me and broached the subject herself.)

Rigg's recent spate of classical work dates back to 1991 when Jonathan Kent, co-artistic director of the Almeida Theater, invited her to play Cleopatra in John Dryden's blank verse tragedy *All for Love*. "I leapt at the chance," says Rigg, "because I hadn't been approached to do a classic play in years and years." The small North London theater group, now one of the most successful companies in Britain, was in its fledgling stage at the time. Rigg's involvement helped to raise its profile considerably, particularly after *Medea* in 1993 and its subsequent Tony-winning Broadway engagement. But Rigg quickly downplays her part in the Almeida's escalating fortunes. "Glenda had been there already," she says, reminding me that Glenda Jackson (since retired from the stage in favor of a political career) opened the first Almeida season in 1990 with *Scenes From an Execution*. "I wasn't putting them on the map by any means," she insists. Nonetheless, she's one of the company's prime assets, and she has enough clout to influence its choice of productions.

Doing *Phèdre* was her idea, Rigg tells me. This marks her second stab at playing the queen who lusts after and destroys her stepson, Hippolytus. She first played the role nearly 25 years ago in the National Theatre production of Tony Harrison's adaptation of the Racine play, titled *Phaedra Britannica* and set in British Raj India. "It's not

quite so fashionable now for actors and actresses to revisit roles, but I wanted to reexamine Phaedra and hopefully do it better," says Rigg. The daughter of a railroad engineer, Rigg had actually spent the first eight years of her life in Jodhpur, India, but the colonial setting of *Phaedra Britannica* put an "uncomfortable" slant on the play, she says. Rigg explains how the gods that determine Phaedra's destiny are extremely familiar to the character in the classical version, but they are doubly alien to a Phaedra who is an English memsahib in India. "Anyway, I think I'm better at it now," she adds confidently. "I've got maturity."

Describing herself as "a bit of an evangelist" for classic theater, Rigg says, "I think it's incumbent upon you — whichever generation you are — to blow the dust reverently off the classics, but at the same time shake them up a bit and make them happen for the age in which you live." Like Medea, Phèdre calls for a performance with all stops out. Both women are ruled by their passions, but there's a significant difference: Medea, who ends up killing her children to spite her husband, embraces revenge, whereas Phèdre fights her illicit desire for Hippolytus to the bitter end. "Each step of the way is so brilliantly charted through the text," say Rigg, "that by the time the last scene comes you can only play it full out, truly."

IVAN KYNCL

As *Medea*, for which she won a 1994 Tony Award.

PHOTOFEST

Ann Beach, Rigg, Brian Murray, and Barry MacGregor in the RSC's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1961).

It was director Kent's idea to pair *Phèdre* in repertory with *Britannicus*, a lesser-known Racine tragedy about the Roman tyrant Nero. In the latter play, Rigg plays Nero's machinating mother Agrippina, who is beginning to realize that she has nurtured a monster for a son and is about to lose her political power. "They work as companion pieces," says Rigg. In *Britannicus*, she adds, she gets a welcome opportunity to take a back seat to her co-star, Toby Stephens (son of Maggie Smith and Robert Stephens), who plays Nero. "The burden on the play is not on me. It's over to Toby, and he does it brilliantly. That's what companies are about."

Since 1991, with the sole exception of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which Howard Davies directed at the Almeida in 1996, Rigg's director of choice has been Kent. He has claimed that Rigg is "absolutely at the zenith of her power," and the actress, in turn, praises the democratic way he conducts rehearsals. "Jonathan has given me a voice in the preparatory stages of a production, which I think most actors and actresses should have anyway. I don't interfere so much with the overall concept because I believe that's very much in the hands of the director and whoever is adapting it," she continues. But she'll offer comments from the point of view of the performer "about what sits comfortably on the tongue and will serve the piece as well."

Before David Hare began work on his adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage*, which Kent directed at the National in 1995, Rigg told the playwright that she wanted to "play it Northern" because she was raised (after returning from India) in Yorkshire. The Northern English dialect lends itself to a specific kind of humor, she explains. Hare subsequently wrote his *Mother Courage* in Northern rhythms, enabling Rigg to give what is arguably her best performance in recent years. Her cerebral quality and earthy humor kept sentimentality at bay, ideal for Brecht's satirical vision.

The text for this current production of *Phèdre* was adapted by the late Poet Laureate Ted Hughes. Daunted by his reputation, but nonetheless determined to make her case as an actress, Rigg says she approached Hughes "with my heart in my mouth" about lines that didn't work. When Phèdre first learns that Hippolytus has fallen in love with Aricia, her response in the original French is "quel?" "That's a wonderful word," Rigg comments. "It's an aspirant which starts at the back of your throat — you can use it." But the literal English translation "what?", "simply does not serve." Hughes came up with a poetic solution: Theseus tells Phèdre that his son has "given his soul" and Phèdre responds by repeating the phrase — "Given his soul?" "It has the same sound [as quel]," Rigg explains. "Soul?" she repeats, savoring the word. "Lovely."

We've come thus far without any mention of *The Avengers*. Though Rigg's place in the top ranks of English classical actresses may be undisputed, there's no escaping her stint as Emma Peel, the sexy, cat-suited secret agent in the hugely popular '60s British television series. Not that Rigg is ashamed of that gig: "It put me on the map quicker than probably 20 years of classical theater around the world, so I'm deeply grateful to it," she says. In fact, she feels vindicated about a career move that is now commonplace for classically trained actors.

No one, for instance, cares that Ralph Fiennes, a Royal Shakespeare Company leading man, took on the role of John Steed, Peel's male counterpart in the recent, unsuccessful big-screen version of *The Avengers*. But where Rigg was concerned, doing the TV show in 1964 was tantamount to betrayal. She had embarked on a promising acting career at the RSC in 1959 Two years later, she was playing Helena in Peter Hall's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and then Cordelia opposite Paul Scofield in Peter Brook's *King Lear* She made her American debut when the legendary Brook production opened the New York State Theater in 1964.

"People were very toffee-nosed about [*The Avengers*]," Rigg recalls. "There was talk about my wasting myself, which is rubbish." After 18 months of doing the series, she returned to Stratford — at that point a huge box-office draw — and played Viola in *Twelfth Night* just to prove her point that "we actors and actresses should be allowed to do everything."

Perhaps what her high-minded critics just couldn't get over was the fact that Rigg was so damn sexy as Emma Peel. She'd been dubbed the "thinking man's sex symbol" and was already such a celebrity that she had to rely on her mother to deal with *Avengers* fan mail. "There are all those postcards out there with my darling mum's signature on them and everybody thinks they're mine," she says, smiling. And when some horny adolescent got carried away, her mother would reply in her own voice, firmly telling the hapless lad, "My daughter is far too old for you." (Today, Rigg will not sign Emma Peel photos, claiming that she feels a fraud signing pictures of herself from 35 years ago.) Meanwhile, other classical actresses flirted with sexy material: Vanessa Redgrave would shortly appear topless in *Blow-Up*, and Glenda Jackson would be subject to Ken Russell's excesses in *The Music Lovers*. "Oh, movies were chic," Rigg remarks dryly. "I suppose dressing in black leather and having fights, and being on television every week was slightly cheap in comparison." Rigg's movie career, which includes a Bond film (*On Her Majesty's Secret Service*) and the lackluster film version of Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*, is not exactly memorable — though you might check out *Theater of Blood*, in which she and Vincent Price camp up a storm, and Paddy Chayefsky's savage comedy *The Hospital*.

As secret agent Emma Peel in *The Avengers*.

After *The Avengers*, Rigg moved on to the National where she played Lady Macbeth in 1972 and Phaedra in 1975 With so many great tragic roles on her résumé, one forgets that she's also an excellent comedienne: She was a big hit as Dottie in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* and Célimène in Molière's *The Misanthrope* (for which she also received a 1975 Tony nomination). "I love the lift that laughter gives you — I even manage to scrape a couple of laughs together in *Britannicus*," she says. "I'd love to do a comedy," she adds, "so hopefully someone somewhere down the line will write me one."

In 1973 she had landed her own comedy series in America, but hadn't realized that the show, *Diana*, was a carbon copy of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Derided as "Mary Tyler Less," it was yanked after 13 episodes. "It deserved to fail," Rigg says with a shrug. "I was deeply relieved, really. Because I had just begun to realize what a grind it was if you're in a successful series no private life. And quite honestly, I have never been prepared to subsidize my private life with my professional life."

By the late '70s, Rigg had all but disappeared from the stage. Following her credo that "actors should be capable of trying everything," her few stage appearances in the next decade included two musicals. *Colette* died on the road to Broadway in 1991, but the 1987 West End revival of Sondheim's *Follies* was a personal triumph. Rigg's ironic delivery and dry wit was perfectly suited to the part of the acidic Phyllis, and Sondheim obliged by giving her a new striptease song for the show "Ah, But Underneath." As it turned out, this fallow period in her career corresponded with the time she took off to raise her daughter, Rachel Stirling.

Now a 21-year-old university student, Stirling recently made her London stage debut playing both Desdemona and a lead in the female version of Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* under the auspices of the National Youth Theatre. "We were both in the West End together this summer; it was great fun." says the proud mother. Rigg deliberately did not encourage Rachel to become an actress. "Children have to make up their own minds," she says. "I was a mother first, and I certainly never discussed the theater at home." But she sounds pleased about the outcome: "I think it's genes coming out in the end."

We're getting close to the hour when Rigg must begin preparations for her evening performance. Now that we've started talking about Rachel, it's time to broach a touchy issue: A recent newspaper article claimed that David Hare based his hit play *Amy's View* — about a domineering English actress and her daughter on Rigg. Dame Diana is ahead of me: "On the subject of my daughter," she begins, drawing herself up on the couch, "*Amy's View* is about to open in New York; for some reason, word has got around that this

play is about me. There are no parallels, and I would like to use this interview as the opportunity to once and for all put this *tacky* rumor to rest.

"When I was first approached by a journalist," Rigg continues, "I played it in a rather ladylike fashion and said, 'Oh, gosh, golly me, how nice that I should be his muse, etc. etc.' Then I got on the phone to David and asked what this was all about. He said, 'It's rubbish; forget it.' But both my daughter and I find it deeply upsetting because we have, thank God, a wonderful relationship. I don't discuss my private life because, like a lot of other actors and actresses, I don't think it has anything to do with anyone else and now, suddenly, it would appear that my private life is on stage. I've kept my counsel, but now that I know it's opening in New York — and I wish the play and Judi [Dench] huge success — I'm not prepared to stay silent anymore. This has got nothing to do with me. The author says no and Diana says no. So would you make that very clear? And," she adds with her ironic smile, "knowing David, if it *were* about me, he'd have offered the part to me!"

Following her BAM engagement, Rigg takes up a one-year post at Oxford University as the Cameron Mackintosh Professor of Theatre Studies. In the summer, she'll continue filming episodes for a current BBC series in which she plays Mrs. Bradley, an eccentric female detective of the 1920s. But you can bet Dame Diana will be back on the boards soon enough. When I asked if she's pleased that her daughter has become an actress, here's her reply: "This is a profession which engages every part of you: your intellect, your emotions, and your physique. And if you have curiosity, it will teach you way beyond whatever play you are doing. If you read everything around that play, why it was written, the predominating elements — politics, philosophy, sex, men, and women — then you can draw on it for the rest of your life. And that's the joy I wish my daughter to discover for herself." ■

GERARD RAYMOND most recently interviewed Brian Bedford for *InTheater*.