

Walking the Beast

Juliet Stevenson gets a green card makes her American stage debut

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Is this woman slightly mad, you ask yourself, watching Juliet Stevenson on stage. That is, you first wonder about the character she is playing. Then, even though you know she is only acting, you wonder about the actor who walks that close to the edge every night. She throws herself into the role with an intensity that makes you fear for her own sanity.

However, when she walks into her dressing room at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, Juliet Stevenson is most civilized, cordial, and very apologetic for being a bit late for the interview. At home, in England, she is sometimes described as "difficult." But today, looking much younger than her 37 years, and with that smile which often flickers over her lips, she is charming and very willing to talk about her acting and her current role.

Stevenson won the Best Actress Laurence Olivier award in 1991 for her harrowing performance in the London production of *Death and the Maiden*. Prior to that she established a distinguished career playing both classical roles, mostly with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and contemporary parts, like that of the dancer in the London production of Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*. Recently she made her U.S. stage debut at the Mark Taper in Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution*, playing opposite an American cast that included Frank Langella and Michael Cumptsy. Stevenson gave a towering performance as Galactia, a Venetian Renaissance painter whose genius and passion is matched by her relentless obsessiveness and her ability to rub everybody the wrong way.

Audiences in this country know Stevenson from the movie *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, the British film which showed how *Ghost* could have been made with intelligence and without becoming maudlin. Six years ago, she had the opportunity to come to



Juliet Stevenson in *Death and the Maiden* at the Royal Court.

New York in the RSC's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, but she chose not to travel with that production. Last year, however, she was all set to repeat the role she created in *Death and the Maiden* for Mike Nichols's Broadway production of the play, when American Equity denied her permission to work in this country. I had to ask her about that first.

TheaterWeek: How is it you are here in the United States? Did Equity change its mind about you?

Juliet Stevenson: I have got a green card now and I don't have to be approved by American Equity. A very wonderful lawyer, whom I didn't know, was so frustrated by that event [*Death and the Maiden*] that he did it all for me as a great gift. There is an exceptional ability category, and he collected all the necessary letters from people and the press stuff. It wasn't really my idea, he just informed me that he was going ahead—putting his skill behind his love of theater.

Were you insulted by the *Death and the Maiden* incident?

Well, not insulted, but it was difficult for it not to feel personal in some way. I felt very frustrated and disappointed at the time, because I didn't quite understand it. I understand there has been a recession, and there is a lot of unemployment, and I quite respect any union which is trying to protect its membership from further erosion, as it were. But I thought there was quite a free flow going on between the two countries. There were a lot of Americans working in London at the time, and as far as I am concerned, that's terrific.

For instance, it was fascinating to work with John Malkovich in *Burn This* when he came over. My much more classical training and his Steppenwolf background—I think we both learned from each other. It is very interesting bringing this English play here and seeing how this American cast responds to it, how they alight on it, and where they come from. I love the idea of cross-fertilization—that to me is what

artistic exploration is all about.

Was it your idea to do *Scenes from an Execution*?

Yes, this was a play which I had read about five years ago and I just adored it and wanted terribly much to do it. It was originally done on the radio with Glenda Jackson. In theory, the character should be much older than I am, and certainly five years ago I was too young. Then Glenda did the first ever theatrical production at the Almeida [a fringe theater in London]. There was talk of it going into the West End but she was too busy or something. Last year, I was asked to do it in the West End and on Broadway, but I wasn't sure whether it would work in a very commercial place. Then Gordon [Davidson, artistic director at the Mark Taper] had a slot available and asked me to do something, and the green card came through, roughly at the same time. This is a wonderful opportunity to rehearse it, open it, and see what it is. Howard Barker is a great writer, and I hardly ever say that of writers.

What is it you like about this writer?

He is a very original voice. It's not naturalism, there is an almost stark, quite charged quality to the writing. I love the way he uses history, not for any archaic interest, but just to place it in a context where you can see things more clearly. He is so sensuous and poetic, rough and muscular, I mean the language in the mouth. His grasp of the English language is phenomenal. And he is an ideas man, but he has the gift never to be polemical. He is also very funny and very sexy. His characters are profoundly three-dimensional and full of contradictions. They are so rounded, there are no villains and heroes.

I guess I don't have to ask if you like the way he wrote your part!

He just writes women's roles wonderfully. Galactia is full of misconceptions, self-delusion, as well as many wonderful strengths and passions, so you are required all the time to dig into yourself and explore those things. She's phenomenal, relentless, monstrous, and fantastic. She is full of confidence about what she is doing but is constructed around so many frailties, I think, like a damaged child. She seems to provoke rejection and can only thrive in situations where she is rejected. She cannot cope with acceptance. There is such a great compassion in writing like that, writing people who are full of flaws and still are a great size.

Since your early days at the RSC, you have been outspoken about kind of roles available to women. Do you pick your roles with something specific in mind?

I am not really interested in issues as an actress. My interest is always in how women are played. I get very, very tired of seeing the small repertoire of stereotypical portrayals of women repeated in a thousand different forms, in the films, television, and on stages.

I have been very lucky. I have had the most incredible run of material in the last few years: *Hedda Gabler*, *Truly*, *Madly*, *Deeply*, *Death and the Maiden*—that was a phenomenal role. Then I did *A Doll's House* for BBC Television, and last Christmas I did the film of David Hare's *The Secret Rapture*. But it is a picking and waiting game these roles, because there are only a handful of them. And it does get harder. Once you have got spoiled by roles like *Truly*, *Madly*, *Deeply*, it is very difficult to go back and play somebody's girlfriend again. And there is no doubt about it, I much prefer to play women who exist in a play or the film in their own right, rather than play, as is so often the case even in great classical roles, somebody's wife, or somebody's daughter. I mean *Lady Macbeth* is a great part, but she still only exists in relation to him; it is the old historical trouble with women's roles. There are many wonderful actresses who are infinitely less stretched than they should be because they are continually in this bind.

Isn't it true that the roles disappear just when actresses reach the peak of their powers, and they don't get opportunities again until they are old enough—

—to play dowagers. Exactly right. It breaks my heart. You see these wonderful actresses, who, as you rightly say, have 20 years experience behind them, and in any other craft, were they musicians or were they furniture makers, they would be doing their best work, but the world says we don't want you anymore. Somehow women of that age do not engage writers' imaginations. Why not? They are infinitely more interesting than they were at twenty.

So why not?

It's all connected, I think, to sexuality—the idea that a 45-year-old woman cannot be beautiful and sexy. But it is a particularly tyrannous fact, I should think, of this country, and I have to say in England as well. Now in Italy, where they



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love older women—

—And the French, too—

—Exactly. Jeanne Moreau and Simone Signoret. A lot of those women have gone on sustaining their careers.

But then again, women at your point in life may be less inclined to travel around and work like you do.

Well, it is obviously true that many women get tied into rearing children, but I think quite a lot are increasingly having children later so they can work more single-mindedly. I work relentlessly single-mindedly. It is my passion. Although I do have another life and it is difficult being here for four months. It takes its toll on others in your life, and if I had children, it would probably have been utterly impossible. You have to make choices, and as you get older you have to make more choices—real hard decisions about whether you want to be monastic about your work like this. Or where you start balancing things out and take the risk of not having the same opportunities in parts.

So from where does this monastic passion come? What is it that drives you?

God, I don't know, it's a disease isn't it? It's a virus for which there is no cure! [Laughs] No, I passionately love doing what I do. If you know what you want to do and you are lucky enough to be able to do it; even luckier enough to be paid to be doing it, and luckier still to be recognized for doing it, you are so blessed. At its best, it fulfills every part of me. At its worst, it drives me crazy and I get real frantic longings to give it up and do something altogether different. Because as you get a bit older, there is something quite humiliating about being an actor, an element that is very wearying and demeaning. A lot of it is so silly—the business—I get very fed up with it. But I feel fairly driven about it on the whole.

I think you can only be as good as your interest and your passion for the work. When that is the case, there are no limits to how you will keep working on something and push it further and further and keep developing. And that's the joy of it, going in every day and keeping working, keeping refining, pushing your own parameters out and exploring the parameters of the piece. If somewhere rather central you don't actually, finally, respect the piece and you think it is a cheat or manipulative, then it is very difficult to

keep going. It's like a battery being removed from a car.

Your batteries seem always fully charged. In both *Death and the Maiden* and in *Scenes from an Execution*, you teeter on the edge of madness.

I am a thinly disguised lunatic! I was parading round the stage in a technical rehearsal dressed in this wild clothing the other day, and I was thinking: the freedom. I mean the freedom to go out there and be able to release all those aspects of yourself. Most people have the capacity to be wild, to be gargantuan in their appetites, to be furious and obsessive, but because we all have to live alongside each other we are all incredibly buttoned down. All those things are tightly controlled by society and one's own personal monitoring system. It is sort of dangerous but luxurious to be allowed to take all those lids off and really turn yourself inside out.

But then you have to put it all back inside after the show. What does that do to you?

I think it is sometimes difficult for the people who are around you. I never realized this, but it is beginning to be clear that there is certainly a sort of shift in personality. It is not that you turn into somebody completely different every night. But we are like radios, you turn certain volume knobs up and other volume knobs down. In this part, she is voracious in her appetite for work, ruthless, full of frailty, and full of fears at some deep level. So as you are working on the part, those things invariably get tuned up and perhaps the more civilized aspects of you get tuned down. And you have to watch it, you know, when you are in everyday life.

The truth is everybody is composed of a thousand personalities and I think being an actor is this opportunity to let these personalities come out for a walk. We are allowed to take those beasts off the lead.

And get applauded for it too!

Yes, licensed to be impossible. I do enjoy going to the limits of civilized behavior

And finally, what is like working for the first time in the US?

In a way it is rather freeing. In London if you do something, you have a whole history there, and certain expectations which develop and so on. Whereas here I feel less pressure, because people don't know who I am. And you can recreate yourself here, it is the old truth about America isn't it? So I am enjoying the adventure of it.

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