



# A WOMAN IN FULL

Vanessa Redgrave puts her faith in love and work, not destiny, writes Jane Cornwell

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charity event a month after her beloved Tash's death.

"Well, that is life, isn't it?" she says now, watching as a breeze sends my physalis leaves skittering across the courtyard. "Did you see Cate Blanchett's production?" she asks. (Blanchett directed Robin Nevin in the play at Sydney Theatre Company in 2008.) "I'm afraid I didn't. But I wish, I wish."

Redgrave hasn't been to Australia since the 1980s, when she visited the National Film and Sound Archive and was presented with a copy of *Robbery under Arms*, a silent black-and-white film about bushrangers that featured her grandfather, Roy Redgrave.

Having starred in popular stage productions in London, Roy left his wife and young son, Vanessa's father Michael, behind in Britain to find his fortune. ("All English actors of that generation wanted to go to Australia because the wages were better," Vanessa says.) His gravestone in Sydney's South Head Cemetery, commissioned by Lynn in 1980, simply reads "Roy Redgrave, actor".

"When my father went out there briefly, aged two, he ran onstage, to the delight of the audience, and grasped my grandfather's knee," Redgrave says with a laugh.

Roy is rarely mentioned in media round-ups of the acting clan, and not just because he was a bit of a boonder. There are just so many of them. Michael, who was a stage and screen heart-throb, married leading lady Rachel Kempson and had Vanessa, Corin and Lynn. "It always felt like Corin was the brains, Vanessa the shining star and then there was Lynn," the youngest Redgrave sibling once said.

Certainly Vanessa's birth got the biggest fanfare: Laurence Olivier, then playing Hamlet at the Old Vic alongside Michael, declared at curtain call, "Laertes has a daughter! Tonight a great actress was born."

Reminded, she sighs, and smooths her silver ponytail. "Well, it was something like that, anyway. He was a very generous, open-hearted man."

Vanessa had Natasha and Joely with film director Tony Richardson, who died in 1991,

and Carlo with Nero two years after they met on *Camelot*. Corin's daughter Gemma acts. Natasha was married to actor Liam Neeson. It remains to be seen whether the grandchildren will carry on the acting lineage, but the odds are pretty good.

Didn't destiny at least have a walk-on part in her choice of career? She taps her ash. "No. If my parents had been killed in the war and I had been sent to an orphanage I wouldn't have seen all the plays, spent all that time with my parent's friends who were actors, like Peggy Ashcroft for instance."

So are the Redgraves the last of the great acting families? Will we see theatrical stars like them again? "There are in fact a lot of other great acting families. It just happens that a lot of us still carry the surname Redgrave, which makes it an easy handle for the press to get a hold of. Just as there are plenty of film stars who've come on stage and been brilliant because they've already done a lot of theatre, but we haven't actually known it!" Her eyes flash. "Because the press aren't interested in theatre!"

Hundreds of acting roles have helped keep the surname in the public sphere. From epoch-defining films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* to Ken Russell's *The Devils*; from Ismail Merchant and James Ivory's *The Bostonians* to the screen adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*; to plays including *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Redgrave has proved herself an actor (she prefers actor) of tremendous integrity, luminosity and instinct. Jane Fonda, her co-star in *Julia*, wrote of her "secret, magnetic, inner rhythm".

She doesn't have any theatre plans for now, but her next films include Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous*, about the "real" scribe behind Shakespeare's works, and *Coriolanus*, Ralph Fiennes's directorial debut. So what if she's done *Mission Impossible* or even *Letters to Juliet*? Redgrave shines on, regardless.

She can be contrary, of course, which is all part of her charm. Her extraordinary old-school curtsy to Prince William at the BAFTA ceremony surprised many.

"Why? Courtesy is an important element in life and in society. I have curtsied to Michelangelo Antonioni, for instance; in the theatre we stage actors bow, unless we're in period costume. Then we curtsy. Those are the formalities."

The BAFTA curtsy, a bow from acting royalty to monarchy, touched on her views about democracy, about which she tells me at length, moving doggedly from the British general elections to the need for Supreme Court judges, international law, the rights of the child and, finally, Shakespeare.

"When you love reading Shakespeare as I do, you see what the struggle for rights is all about," she says, as her handsome husband hovers into view.

"Shakespeare is the real, ever-enduring celebrity because he is celebrated in every country in almost every language."

Bringing the discussion back to *Letters to Juliet*, I ask how Claire and Lorenzo's wedding compared with hers and Nero's. "Theirs was very nicely done, but it wasn't half as good as ours." She tells me animatedly about how beautiful theirs was. How it felt like a celebration of having known one another for so long. How they'd held it on New Year's Eve, which happens to be her birthday. How Joely did all the organising and lots of close friends and children came, and there was dancing and laughing and love. Nero, eavesdropping, looks over and smiles.

Two days after our interview, Lynn lost her fight with breast cancer. The two had grown close in recent years; three losses to the Redgrave dynasty in the space of 14 months feels too cruel, too unfair, for words. Happy endings, real happy endings, are hard to come by. Vanessa, one hopes, will find the strength and resources to manage, aided by her faith in human nature.

"The wonderful thing about Shakespeare," she says, "is the way he lets you know that in spite of all the terrible hard knocks of time and circumstance, human beings are built to want higher things. All my personal experience confirms that."

She fixes me with those cornflower-blue eyes again. "There is always more to reach for," she says.

Evan Williams's review of *Letters to Juliet*  
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