



and screen (“I’m always looking for the iceberg below the tip”) has allowed her to sort through sometimes deep-seated stuff. Initially resistant to Icke’s suggestion that she stay onstage during the interval, she says she discovered that she enjoyed sitting quietly (“Life is extremely busy so to be in my own bubble is wonderful”), relieved of worrying about coming on and going off.

“I’ve had this long reflection on exits and entrances,” she says. “I’ve made millions of them in my life but have always found them difficult. I mean, what is my identity in the wings as opposed to onstage? Who am I when I’m rehearsing?”

“This play is all about identity. At this moment in history it is distressing to see how identity politics are fragmenting groups when we need to come together to dig in deeper and resist these huge movements to the right.”

Stevenson is well-known as a campaigner for the rights of torture victims, refugees and asylum-seekers, for fronting up at protest rallies, speaking out on behalf of women in her industry, with its glass ceiling and dearth of central roles for actresses over 35.

Forget — dust off — the clichés about dogooding luvvies. Stevenson has consistently, genuinely, put time and energy into fighting injustice believing that she — we — can make a difference.

She turns up her palms. “Being political is part of who I am. It’s not a choice.”

The third of three children born in Essex to a teacher mother and army engineer father, the young Juliet had an itinerant childhood. Stints in Germany and Australia didn’t prepare her for the extreme poverty she encountered (while searching for a lost dog) in 1960s Malta, which inspired her political awakening.

“I was aware of the absolute hierarchy of the army and very uncomfortable with it. But I hadn’t seen that sort of deprivation before, and I was viscerally shocked. It fed into this sense of right and wrong, of why it is that a person born in one place should not have the same chances as a person born in another?”

“What’s interesting is that now I’ve had kids” — Rosalind, 25, and Gabriel, 18, with her long-time partner, the filmmaker and anthropologist Hugh Brody — “I can see how that does or doesn’t happen in a child. From an early age my youngest would be beside himself with anger and upset about something in the world not being fair.” She flashes a grin. “He’s very political, which fills me with hope.”

Stevenson might have become, say, a human rights lawyer were she not bitten by the acting bug at boarding school in Surrey. She was set to study English and drama at Bristol University

when, on a whim, she wrote a letter to London’s Royal Institute of Dramatic Art (“The only drama school I’d heard of”), auditioned with a piece from Harold Pinter’s *Old Times* (“Only because I had a crush on Pinter; I still don’t understand the play”) and was accepted.

She joined the RSC soon after graduating and stayed for a decade, treading the boards with Jonathan Pryce, David Suchet and Alan Rickman, the “big brother” with whom she’d co-star, aged 34, as Nina in *Truly Madly Deeply* — a part that director Anthony Minghella had written especially for her.

The movie made her a household name. “Like a young Vanessa Redgrave,” remarked the film critic David Thomson. Spielberg offered Stevenson a role in *Schindler’s List* on the strength of it but she was committed elsewhere. Then came her second signature role as Paulina in Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman’s psychological thriller *Death and the Maiden* at London’s Royal Court Theatre, which bagged her a Time Out Best Actress Award, and an Olivier.

Hollywood kept calling. Sometimes Stevenson answered. Mostly she didn’t. She made Brit-

ish films including 2002’s *Bend It Like Beckham* and TV series such as *The Hour* (BBC), *One of Us* (Netflix) and, recently, *Riviera* (Sky), a *Dynasty*-style drama set on the Cote d’Azur, the Mediterranean coastline of France. It wasn’t, you feel, her dream set-up: “I adored the cast, who were fantastic as actors and human beings,” she says of a list that includes Julia Stiles and Anthony LaPaglia.

“People said how lucky I was to be filming in the sun for seven months. But the view from my hotel window seemed to summarise the world. There was Nice, which has experienced terrorism and radical extremism. There were the helicopters and yachts of the super rich, and the Mediterranean, where 2000 people drowned last year, many of them children, and nobody gives a toss.”

Such big-budget jobs permit her to do the work she loves best, at theatres such as the Almeida — where actors take home an average of £300 (\$580) a week — and narrating audiobooks, a sideline for which she is beloved. The classics are both her forte and her delight, with novels by Jane Austen to Charles Dickens, the

Brontës to George Eliot, brought to life by her nuanced, transporting delivery. “Literature is the expression of the human condition, a way of making us recognise each other and ourselves,” says Stevenson, who two weeks ago was filming in the deserts of Israel with American director Terrence Malick, who had originally sought her out to narrate another project (“Terry is a god, a great artist, and an audiobook nut. All he wanted to talk about was audiobooks.”)

“I’ve always loved reading but had less and less time. Now I am literally inhabiting the Elizabethan canon, the world of French 19th-century novelists, George Eliot ... I’d never have read all of *Middlemarch*, which is phenomenal for the way it concentrates on the specifics to speak to the universal, how she writes from a passionate love of humankind. But with every book I will prepare the voices and make sure I know how I’m going to characterise somebody. It’s really important to serve the listener.”

It’s all part of what helps keep Stevenson match-fit, ready for the next challenge.

That and her humanity, the silver thread that seems to connect most of what she does. “We have more in common than that which divides us,” she says.

“We should never lose sight of that.”

The Doctor plays as part of Adelaide Festival from February 27.

Main and left: Juliet Stevenson in *The Doctor*; Stevenson in the movie *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, above left; and in the 2002 film *Food of Love*, above right



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