



RUDE HEALTH

Jane Cornwell discovers acclaimed actress Juliet Stevenson is also a political activist committed to fighting injustice

Juliet Stevenson is often cited as the greatest British stage actor of her generation. This doesn't make her feel pressured, necessarily. But taken alongside her numerous awards and honours — BAFTA and Olivier Awards, a CBE from the Queen for services to drama — it definitely helps keep her on her toes.

"You've got to be so careful as you age as an actor," she says, sitting at her wooden kitchen table on a rainy morning in north London, her hands around a mug of ginger tea. "There's a real danger of getting stuck in a box of old habits and mannerisms. I mean, how many actors can you think of that actually get better as they grow old?"

She is wearing a long-sleeved white top under denim dungarees and seems younger than her 63 years. She's remarkably unstarty for someone who has played every strong female lead going for the Royal Shakespeare Company and appeared in films such as the 1990 British fantasy drama *Truly, Madly, Deeply* — a sort of *Ghost* for grown-ups that allowed Stevenson to express talents including dancing, playing the piano and grief-crying until mucus swung from her nose.

She smiles, eyes bright. "So I'm always saying to directors, 'Push me! Treat me like I've just left drama school! Don't be afraid to give me notes!'"

For her central performance in *The Doctor*, an update of Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 Viennese drama *Professor Bernhardt*, celebrated British theatremaker Robert Icke shoved Stevenson to her limits, she says. Then he demanded even more. "Rob is relentless!" the mother of two offers happily.

Their combined efforts, along with those of a stellar 10-strong supporting cast, resulted in a wildly acclaimed production that sold out its summer 2019 run at the Almeida Theatre in Islington, a 15-minute bus ride from where we are now, and will transfer to London's West End in April.

In the meantime, *The Doctor* makes its Australian premiere at the Adelaide Festival next month. "Taking work beyond London is vital," said Icke on collecting the gong for Best Director at the 2019 London Evening Standard Theatre Awards. "I am thrilled that more people will have access to this production, and to Juliet's luminous performance."

The piece is Icke's parting gift to the Almeida, where he has been a formidable associate director for six years. At 33 he's outgrown the "wunderkind" label ascribed to him by critics bowled over by his pioneering contemporary versions of classics by the revered likes of Aeschylus (*Oresteia*), Chekhov (*Uncle Vanya*) and Ibsen (*The Wild Duck*). All after setting out his provocateur stall in 2014 with *Mr Burns, A Post-Electric Play*, a work by modern American playwright Anne Washburn loosely based on *The Simpsons*, and which was widely panned.

Stevenson is one of a recurring group of actors favoured by Icke, for whom the ideal actor/director relationship is one of deepening, ongoing exploration. The two collaborated first in 2017 when Stevenson played Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet (played by Andrew Scott, aka Fleabag's "hot priest"), in a production that imagined Shakespeare's *Elsinore* as a CCTV-speckled sur-

veillance state. They teamed up in 2018 on Friedrich Schiller's 1800 political thriller *Mary Stuart*, notable for the charged nightly coin toss that decided which of the queens (Mary or her nemesis, Elizabeth I) Stevenson and co-star Lia Williams would be playing.

"Rob is as much a writer as a director," says Stevenson of Icke, a working-class University of Cambridge graduate whose audacious rewrites and radical stagings are intended to expose the original essence of the work. Period dress is eschewed. Conventions are overturned. Cliches are dusted off.

"His speech has real rhythm and phrasing, which makes sense since he is a musician as well. He is fizzing with intellectual energy. Bam, bam!"

She clicks her fingers twice, causing the family's golden cockapoo, Milly, who is dozing on cushions nearby, to look up.

"This is the work I love to do," she continues fervently. "Exciting, unsettling things that turn the soil in terms of how we think and how we see each other."

Originally banned in Vienna, the Schnitzler play denounced the anti-Semitism that was spreading through Austrian society by posing an ethical conundrum: a Jewish doctor is attacked for refusing a Catholic priest permission to give last rites to an ailing patient. The *Doctor* keeps that original premise but makes the protagonist female: Stevenson is Dr Ruth Wolff, founder of a prestigious medical institute and a secular Jew who denies a priest access to a 14-year-old Catholic girl dying from a botched abortion, wanting to spare the girl further distress.

A social media witch-hunt ensues. Wolff comes off badly in a TV debate about medical ethics, blindsided by the intolerant wallop of identity politics — politics that, at face value, speaks to our image of our selves according to class, gender, race and sexuality. Notions of unconscious bias are addressed by Icke's extreme casting. Women play men. Black actors play white. It's a theatre of ideas, prodding us into thinking about morality, belief systems, human relations and the present state of the world.

Stevenson is onstage throughout the entire immersive three hours — including sitting quietly on her own during the interval. Praise for her performance has been effusive. "One of the peaks of the theatrical year," declared the *Guardian*. "Impeccable ... for all her chilly intellect and toughness, [Wolff] is as vulnerable as an open wound," stated the *Times*. And as the character runs the gamut of emotions from rage to confusion to anguish the audience is repeatedly asked to ponder the question: how free are we, really, to choose our own identities?

"Ruth isn't easy, which is why I love playing her. She has hugely high standards of herself and others." She pauses. "I'm fascinated by women's relationship with power. I've had some very painful experiences of working with women who've become powerful in their industry. There's this white-knuckle grip; they feel they have to watch their backs so there's no room for trust or collaboration."

Stevenson is used to confronting her own uncomfortable feelings. Playing some of the most complex and interesting characters on the stage