

The Redgrave Family

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Interview with Vanessa
by Lynn Barber

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Vanessa Redgrave, the reigning matriarch of Britain's most famous acting dynasty, veteran of stage and screen and a radical Trotskyist, has always claimed her first love is revolutionary politics. But Lynn Barber would rather get personal ...

Journalists usually describe Vanessa Redgrave's flat in Chiswick, West London, as 'modest', which made me expect some dismal shoe-box. Actually it is quite large and very prettily decorated with good antiques and also, when I went, dozens of fabulous flower arrangements sent for her 69th birthday. There is a big, almost country, kitchen at the back which is obviously equipped for serious cooking. The whole place feels more cheerful than I expected. But it is 'modest' in London property price terms and therefore proof, if any were needed, that she puts her money where her mouth is - into political causes. I am going to have to call her Vanessa in this article, though it sounds horribly matey, because there are just so many Redgraves. Do I need to remind you of them all? Probably not, but just in case:

Michael Redgrave, famous theatrical knight and a matinee idol in his youth, revealed after his death to have been a bisexual with a taste for rough trade, married Rachel Kempson, famous actress, and produced three children, Vanessa, Corin and Lynn (in that order) who all became actors.

Vanessa, in turn, produced another two actors - Joely and Natasha Richardson, from her marriage to Tony Richardson, a film director, also bisexual, who died of Aids - as well as a theatre-director son, Carlo Nero, from her affair with the Italian actor Franco Nero.

Natasha Richardson is married to yet another famous actor, Liam Neeson, so no doubt there will be another clutch of thespians down the line.

Corin also has an acting daughter, Jemma.

The only one who seems not to have pulled her weight in prolonging the dynasty is Lynn Redgrave, whose children are a teacher, photographer and pilot respectively.

But clearly the day will come when all actors have to be in some way descended from Michael Redgrave.

Vanessa is the reigning matriarch, her mother having died three years ago, and I do almost feel inclined to curtsy when I meet her. She's such a huge, imposing presence - not fat, just big, 6ft tall and built like a quarterback, with that great long, famous face and husky voice. John Osborne (who loathed her) used to call her Big Van. She moves with a slight limp because she is waiting for a second hip replacement, and we spend some time sorting out where we want to sit and lighting our cigarettes (she smokes almost as much as I do).

The film we are meant to be talking about, *The White Countess*, is the last Merchant-Ivory film, Ismail Merchant the producer having died before it was finished. (Vanessa's eyes duly fill with tears when she mentions him.) It is set in pre-war Shanghai and stars Natasha Richardson and Ralph Fiennes, with Vanessa and her sister Lynn in minor roles. Luckily, I can say quite truthfully that I thought Natasha Richardson was brilliant, and Vanessa is grateful: 'It's lovely that you think that because then I can say what I really feel! I feel inhibited in saying how wonderful I thought she was otherwise, but I thought she was extraordinary.' This saves me having to say

what I thought of her own performance (hammy) but, anyway, she only has a couple of scenes.

She accepted the tiny part because it meant working with her daughter and sister, and also gave her a chance to visit China for the first time. 'I had an invitation to go there [on a cultural exchange] in 1967, but I didn't get there - I changed my mind in Moscow. I thought - but it was a delusion on my part - that I could save my marriage if I went back to Italy, where my husband was. So I missed China to save my marriage, but I didn't save my marriage. But that was OK, because we loved each other to the end.' This is a very bald account of what sounds from her autobiography to have been a most unhappy period in her life - Tony Richardson had fallen in love with Jeanne Moreau and was not thrilled when Vanessa returned.

Anyway, she says, it was lovely working with Natasha and Lynn. She and Lynn have had some spats in the past, but 'that's longpast. Anyway, families have the right to have a few spats. We love each other immensely.'

It must be terribly daunting for other people, though, coming into this great clan.

'Well, you never know, do you? I mean from my point of view I always think how nice it must be to know us!' Seeing my raised eyebrows she continues defiantly, 'Because we're fun.'

Are they? I must say it never in a million years occurred to me that the Redgraves might be fun - I always pictured them weeping and raging and arguing and making each other sign petitions - but Vanessa in the flesh seems somewhat warmer and less self-absorbed than I expected, though still not my idea of fun.

I keep trying to make her smile because she looks lovely when she smiles, but it is uphill work: she seems to think it is her duty to be serious. The only time I actually make her laugh is when she is droning on about the morons who watch programmes like Celebrity Big Brother and I tell her, 'You're talking to one of them,' and she throws her head back and laughs with genuine amusement. Otherwise her laugh mode seems to be a rather raucous braying chuckle that bears no relation to humour.

The trouble is that she takes interviews terribly seriously. She has a great (probably deserved) mistrust of journalists and scans each question for hidden bear-traps before answering at tediously cautious length. She seems drawn to put the heaviest possible spin on everything.

And even the most anodyne questions sometimes upset her. I say I gather she prefers doing theatre to films (because she is quoted as saying that in several interviews), but she responds indignantly: 'No I don't! I've never said such things in my life. I love both mediums and they're quite different. I don't prefer doing theatre. No! No! I mean I could throw in my father - he was rather snobbish about making films when he started, but then he had the luck to work with Hitchcock and other very great directors, David Lean and Karel Reisz, so he realised how wrong he was. So when you've worked with the maestros [weirdly, she pronounces this as my-estros] you begin to learn what is extraordinary, and I've been lucky to have worked with some great my-estros - Karel Reisz, Antonioni, Zinnemann, Tony Richardson - so I know the difference and I love the difference. I love what cinema can do.'

There is more, much more, in this vein - she is determined to establish that she loves cinema. I suspect that, like many actors, she uses press interviews to advertise her career needs and that nowadays, with her bad hip, she probably hopes to do more film work and less theatre. Her last theatrical

outing, as Hecuba with the RSC last year, got absolutely stinking reviews: one described her as playing Euripides's great tragedy 'like a dismayed district nurse'. Anyway, I promise to 'set the record straight' in my article: she loves cinema just as much as theatre. Hold the front page.

Almost every profile ever written of Vanessa Redgrave describes her as 'fearless'. I wonder if she'd say that of herself. 'No I wouldn't. Would you? I don't think there exists a single person who can describe themselves as fearless. I'm certainly afraid of disasters hitting people I love, or even people I don't know, and I'm certainly afraid of the terrible mistakes governments are making because I can see the consequences coming along the line. I'm extremely fearful of governments undermining the United Nations, to see the international conventions which have been my life's inspiration, and my generation's, the ground we walked on really, being destroyed - that frightens me because it carries enormous implications. I'm a Unicef ambassador and consider it the highest honour I could possibly have. But I notice that the Financial Times has just done a big put-down on celebrity ambassadors and I think, "OK, so what's the purpose behind this? Why is a very good newspaper like the FT attacking ambassadors like Angelina Jolie? There's got to be another reason."'

Could it be, I wonder silently, that the FT finds the whole idea of celebrity ambassadors intrinsically risible, as I do? But there is no point trying to explain this to her because she has no sense of humour. Anyway, this is an absolutely typical Vanessa answer - first, in its muddle-headedness, second, in its slight strain of paranoia (FT spearheading capitalist plot to undermine Angelina Jolie?), but mainly because - as she always does - she has swerved from the personal to talk about the political.

It makes me long for the days when her interviews had to be about either the 'the politics' or 'the work', because I would do almost anything not to hear her talk about politics. But politics seems to be her default setting - you can ask a question on almost any subject and she will soon veer off into the plight of the Chechens, the Bosnians, the Iraqis - so many people, so many plights, I lose track and occasionally wonder if she does, too.

It's as if she finds it safer to talk about politics than to talk about herself. I treat her to my well-worn theory (I must say I am beginning to get bored with it myself) that worrying about world events is really a form of displacement activity for worrying about oneself. She slaps me down firmly: 'Well, Lynn, that often comes up in newspapers. But it's up to every citizen to do what they can to help build a better society. I was brought up during the Second World War, so naturally that's my point of view.'

I tell her: 'I know it's very frivolous and bad of me, but ...' and she chuckles, 'Well, be frivolous and bad if you want to be!' 'But,' I continue, 'you have to realise that there are selfish people like me who just don't care about the rest of the world.' She is genuinely shocked: 'You're not one of them! Are you one of them? I don't think so.' 'Yes I am,' I insist. 'I don't care what's happening in Kosovo, I really don't. I care a lot about what happens to my family and friends, so I'm not entirely selfish. But I sometimes think it's easier to worry about people on the other side of the world than to worry about people you know.'

She is obviously hurt, and says, almost tearfully, 'Well obviously that's how it seems to you. I don't find any of it easier.' She seems so distressed that I apologise, but she urges me on - 'It's all right. It's OK. Don't worry' - even while she dabs her eyes.

So then I quote the passage from her autobiography where Natasha, aged six, begs her to stay at home and spend more time with her. (Her autobiography

could almost be subtitled: A mother's desperate flight from her children.) She writes: 'I tried to explain that our political struggle was for her future, and that of all the children of her generation.'

She looked at me with a serious, sweet smile. "But I need you now. I won't need you so much then."

My sympathies were all with Natasha. Vanessa surprises me by saying, 'I absolutely agree with you.' So is she admitting she was wrong?

'Yes. But I did what I thought was right, as I saw it at the time. I came to see that that was a big mistake, that the two are totally interconnected and that if you separate them, and say either or, you'll make some big mistakes both with your own children and other people's children.'

This leads on to the big question: why did she get so embroiled in politics, even to the detriment of her children, her marriage, her career? She likes to say that it's because she grew up during the Second World War and, 'We listened to the news every night and it was world news, it wasn't about whales in the Thames, you know?'

This sounds quite plausible - until I think of my parents and all their friends who have very clear memories of the war, but have never shown the slightest inclination to join the Workers Revolutionary Party. I think a more realistic explanation might be Lynn Redgrave's remark that, 'Vanessa always thought of herself as Joan of Arc. A bit of the touch of the martyr.' And perhaps her political involvement was a way of trying to impress her father. He was a socialist in his youth, but got his fingers burned during the war when he joined what turned out to be a Communist front organization and was briefly banned by the BBC. Thereafter he kept quiet about his politics for the sake of his career.

Vanessa was always on the Left, but the point at which she disappeared into the extreme Left was in 1973 when she joined Gerry Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party. Corin had joined two years before, but she resisted until a wave of London car bombings convinced her that 'the British military dictatorship' was performing acts of provocation. She was distraught - she also admits in her autobiography that she was drinking heavily at the time, 'opening a bottle of cheap wine every morning to get the fuzzy obliteration of alcohol'.

She describes her decision to join the party in the same terms as a religious conversion: 'I realized at that moment that I had no other way to live except in a political struggle with a party that knew that a serious study of history is necessary if we are to gain understanding and prevent a recurrence of repression. I rang Corin and asked him to come to my home then and there. I told him I wanted to apply immediately to become a Trotskyist and a member of the Socialist Labour League.'

She met Gerry Healy (an ugly toad of a man) and traveled with him to meetings: 'The next few weeks were among the most exhilarating of my life. It seemed to me that I learned more in that short space of time than in the whole of my previous existence.'

Healy was delighted with his new convert and got her to buy a house in the Peak District to turn into a 'college of Marxism'. According to later defectors, the Red House was run almost like a prison - guards patrolled the perimeter and students were not allowed contact with their families or the outside world, for fear of MI5 infiltration. Naturally, the press were suspicious and in 1978 police raided the house on a tip-off from The Observer that it contained a stockpile of arms. No arms were found and Vanessa and

Corin sued The Observer for libel but lost and were left with huge costs.

Then, in 1985, the tabloids mounted a huge expose of Gerry Healy based on testimony from defectors - he had sexually abused dozens of women and stolen party funds. Almost all the party members then left - except the Redgraves, who stayed loyal to Healy till his death in 1989.

She writes unrepentantly in her 1991 autobiography: 'I can truthfully say that I remain absolutely convinced of the necessity of Marxism and that not for a single day has my conviction been shaken. On the contrary, it has grown deeper with experience and the passing of time. That this should be so I ascribe not to my own resoluteness and determination - though I think I can show those qualities when the occasion demands - but to the training and education I received from the party I joined, and from the man who led it for almost all those years, Gerry Healy.'

And no, she does not think she was brainwashed by him. She is firm about this - but slightly less firm when I ask whether she ever regrets her involvement with him.

'Hm. You really are pitching in the whole bag aren't you? I never, ever regret what I have learned and I've learned from many people. I learned about history from Gerry Healy to a depth and a precision that I would never have done otherwise.' But does she in retrospect think she believed too much in Gerry Healy? 'I won't discuss this any more,' she says angrily. 'Particularly because I had a case against The Observer and that taught me quite a lot, too.'

What about? 'A lot! About a lot, Lynn!'

Anyway, she says, she is no longer involved in domestic politics: 'My main concern has not been any political party for a long time, since I first became a Unicef ambassador.' But actually this is untrue: she and Corin set up the Peace and Progress Party just last year, to fight three seats in the General Election - predictably they lost their deposit. For all her hectic campaigning over the years, the only tangible result Vanessa seems to have achieved was to stop Tesco building a superstore in Hammersmith two years ago.

Her acting career, however - I suppose I should have said this earlier - is studded with great triumphs. Her mother went on acting till her nineties - would she like to do the same?

'No. I'd rather like not to - but I suspect I will.'

Why would she like not to?

'I'm not sure why, Lynn. There's a conflict because at my age I'd like to spend more time with my grandchildren and I think it would be awfully nice if I ever could have a choice. But I haven't got a choice because, apart from having to work so that I can pay the mortgage, I do believe that good theatre is essential for keeping society human and humane and sane. I came to realise that in Sarajevo - that the arts are fundamental to human existence and human resistance and to keeping humanity and saving children.'

Oh God, she's done it again - one minute we're talking about whether she wants to retire and next minute we're in Sarajevo. It is as if she can never allow herself to say, 'I do this because I like it, because I'm good at it' - everything has to be for the greater good of humanity. It is infuriating but, I suppose, by now incurable.

The odd thing is that when we are saying our goodbyes, she fixes me with

her beautiful eyes and says, with surprise, 'I like you!' and I find myself saying, to my own surprise, 'I like you, too!'

But then she adds: 'And I don't quite believe you don't care about peasants in Kosovo.' Wrong again: she is wrong about everything. But perhaps that is part of her charm.