

'I thought I'd be bored but I love playing her'

Juliet Stevenson is enjoying a blinding career run. From being buried up to her waist in Beckett's *Happy Days*, to alternating *Elizabeth I* and *Mary Queen of Scots* on a coin toss, she's won legions new fans who don't remember her from *Truly Madly Deeply* or *Bend It Like Beckham*.

The 60-year-old has been tearing up the Almeida stage with late life sexual passion in Robert Icke's sellout *Hamlet*, but reveals she'd previously rejected the part of Gertrude.

"I thought I would be bored playing her; I have turned it down before. I said 'oh no, please Robert's do something else'. But I love working with him and said 'I will only do it if you allow us to look at why Ophelia and Gertrude are so silent. If the production will frame that silence, place it in a context and lift those two roles'. I feel we have done that."

As the modern dress production transfers to the West End starring Andrew Scott's febrile Dane, the Highgate actress enthuses about "the passion and emotional detail" Icke has brought to the play.

"It's not just about one young man, it's about men and women, power and hypocrisy. Quite often *Hamlet* the play focuses on Hamlet the character and everyone else is two dimensional. We have looked at the whole human canvas. There's

Juliet Stevenson tells **Bridget Galton** her fears about playing Hamlet's mother were allayed by Robert Icke's rich and passionate production

lots of deep love and detailed exploration of these complex relationships. The play has come up so richly under that lens."

Gertrude's painful dilemma to pursue a personal desire that hurts her beloved son, has rarely been more keenly felt.

"She's passionate about Hamlet and passionate about her new husband. She's completely caught by these two male focuses of her life. It's fascinating to look at a woman of my age who has for the first time in her life fallen completely sensually in love. She knows this overhasty marriage has made Hamlet miserable but she couldn't help herself. It's one of the many clichés that women aren't supposed to be sexual after 40. It's been great to blast that particular cliché out of the water."

Known for the emotional intelligence of Olivier-nodded performances in numerous RSC



Juliet Stevenson as Gertrude in *Hamlet* now running at the Harold Pinter Theatre.

Picture: MANUEL HARLAN

and NT roles, Stevenson's not interested in playing Shakespeare as "heritage pieces".

"Always my interest and desire is to look for how they are relevant to us and tell stories about who we are now. If you really look at them in detail, firstly you get very rounded characters and secondly you really feel for them. If audiences are really moved by the human struggle, it's so much more rewarding. This (*Hamlet*) doesn't feel remote, it's a great characteristic of Robert's work that people are involved and moved."

At a time when many actresses find roles drying up, she's experienced the opposite: "It's been the most wonderful three years. I'm on a high. But there had been a period when I felt 'why when I have been working for 35 years is there so little work that references that?'"

As you get older you get better at your job but where are the roles?"

Although her agent is cross she's "not available for telly" Stevenson is grabbing her moment and after *Hamlet* plays a locked-in stroke patient in *Wings* at the Young Vic.

"I have been really challenged, ventured into new territory and been really scared thinking 'I don't know how I am going to manage this' which is the best place to be. Showing what it's like to be inside the head and heart of someone who can't speak or connect to the world is brave and terrifying."

In Schiller's *Mary Stuart* at the Almeida she and Lia Williams alternated the leads on a coin toss. "I thought it a little gimmicky but once you explore the play you realise so much of Elizabeth and Mary's lives was down to destiny. Either could have been the other. It was a terrific way to start an

evening. There was a risk and uncertainty the audience found on exciting. You could feel them on the edge of their seats every night." She agrees that for most actresses of her age, "there's a dearth of roles". "I've been lucky, but that's not the rule for women in their middle years. Their careers hit a plateau in a way men's don't."

"But Women want to see their lives reflected in complex and interesting ways. We so often struggle with a two dimensional roles. Bit what's the interest of playing that as an actress?"

Theatre, she says conveys "the complexity of human exchange".

"I don't think people really receive things if they don't feel them. If audiences connect and really feel the truth it will sink in. Acting is allowing people to feel their way through the play and inviting them to inhabit it."

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Review

COMMON National Theatre ★★☆☆☆

DC Moore's ambitious work is far from a dry history play, but – despite losing half an hour from its original three-hour run time – it's an unwieldy beast that Jeremy Herrin's production struggles to tame.

Rural England, 1809, a time of forced enclosure: the fencing off of common land, turning small independent farmers into low-paid labourers for the wealthy. But as soon as the local lord orders Irish workers to put up fences, the villagers burn them down.

That struggle has plenty of potential resonance: the side effects of modernisation, populist rebellion, anger turned on unwanted migrants. But

Moore also throws in a taboo melodrama, supernatural meanderings, Wicker Man-esque Pagan cult, fourth wall-breaking and gleeful anachronisms, plus ostentatious symbols like dead animals.

The loamy, expletive-ridden poetry is intriguing but dense, making an already complex piece wilfully bewildering. It's hard to get invested in the personal and political dramas when there's little space for either character or theme to develop.

Anne-Marie Duff is compelling as the scheming, bewitching heroine, who somehow transcends class and gender; but Mary remains more idea than person. She's strongest interacting with the sadly underused Cush Jumbo as fiery country girl Laura –

though their romance surely would have provoked more of a response.

There's good support from Tim McMullan as a sardonic aristocrat and Trevor Fox as his ferocious right-hand, but John Dagleish seems oddly miscast, failing to convince as the violent rebellion leader who lusts after his sister.

Richard Hudson's barren earth leaves the actors stranded on the vast Olivier stage.

More effective is Stephen Warbeck's percussive music and Paule Constable's painterly, expressive sky. Striking moments, from a talking crow to the literal spilling of guts, but lacks either the historical detailing or primal power to consistently engage.

MARIANKA SWAIN



Anne-Marie Duff and Cush Jumbo in *Common*.

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON