

British actress Diana Rigg (1938-2020)

By Paul Bond
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Diana Rigg, who died September 10 aged 82, was a fine classical actress who struggled against over-identification with her popular successes. Like Honor Blackman before her, Rigg's recognition for the television series *The Avengers* and an appearance as a "[James] Bond girl" in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (Peter Hunt, 1969) threatened to overwhelm her other achievements.

Rigg resisted this. She refused to sign *Avengers* photographs that were sent to her, saying that "it would have been death to have been labelled forever by that one TV series." Her extensive, significant theatre work was a better response, but those glamorous 1960s successes were built on genuine qualities. Her sexy, knowing and self-assured performance in *The Avengers* remains a joy.

Rigg ended up successfully negotiating the transition back and forth between stage and television. She regretted not making more films, but was keen to keep exploring new ground, explaining that "being doomed to the classics is as limiting as doing a series for the rest of your life."

Rigg was born in Doncaster, Yorkshire. Her father, Louis, was a railway engineer, and her parents had been in India since 1925. Shortly after her birth, Louis took the family back to Jodhpur, where he was working. The family returned to Leeds in 1945, Louis rejoining them in 1948.

Diana was sent to a girls' boarding school run by the Moravian church. The gulf between their privileged Raj life and postwar Yorkshire furthered her feelings at school of being "a fish out of water," but this helped shape a steely character. As she observed later, if things had to be said she would say them.

Rigg began acting at school and earned admission to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA). She was engaged at this time, and Louis advised her to choose between her marriage and drama school. She went to drama school.

Her professional debut came with a RADA production in 1957. After graduating in 1959, she joined Tyrone Guthrie and Peter Hall's company at Stratford-upon-Avon, which became the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). Rigg was part of a dazzlingly inventive company, alongside Paul Scofield, Ian Holm, Judi Dench and Ian Richardson, among

others.

In her five years at Stratford she progressed from walk-ons to a lively Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Hall, an authoritative Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Cordelia to Scofield's towering 1962 *King Lear*.

When her RSC contract expired Rigg was without work. Extracts from some RSC productions, including her West End debut in Jean Giraudoux's *Ondine* (1961), had been included in the series "Theatre Night," and Rigg was also involved in some theatrical adaptations, like Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1965), for ITV's "Play of the Week." But her defining television moment came when her agent put her up to replace Blackman in *The Avengers*. Her three seasons there made her career.

The programme was moving from straightforward thriller to a lighter, more comedic tone. Feeling that Blackman's original replacement, Elizabeth Shepherd, lacked those qualities, the producers recast.

Rigg's sophisticated intelligence and knowing glamour were perfect. Mrs Emma Peel was a clever character and strikingly independent, more than able to fight her way out of trouble.

This, with Rigg's cool detachment and irony, enabled her to transcend somewhat the studio's idea of a sex object. Rigg was undeniably sexy, but Mrs Peel's relationship with John Steed (Patrick Macnee) was something more. Theirs was an intimate, flirtatious and apparently chaste friendship. Evidently built on Rigg's pleasure at working with Macnee, whom she once called one of her only two friends on that set, their relationship made the series an enduring favourite.

It was a clever set of thriller mysteries that stand up in their own right. Rigg's second season (the show's fifth) saw the transition from black and white, and its inventive use of colour was a further revelation. By her last season *The Avengers* was teetering into a broader cartoonishness that is less satisfactory.

Rigg's determined independence was not confined to the screen. During the first series she learned that she was earning one-third the cameraman's wage. "I kicked up a fuss and I became incredibly unpopular as a result... I was made out to be mercenary and a jumped-up actress who

should be grateful for her opportunity.”

Her refusal to make another episode until her wages were adjusted resulted in her pay being doubled.

The Avengers was hard toil, but Rigg continued to take theatre work. This included another *King Lear*, playing Regan to Laurence Olivier’s *Lear*. That relationship was reprised in Olivier’s valedictory 1983 television performance.

Rigg was uneasy about the public attention *The Avengers* generated. Throughout her life she determinedly kept part of herself outside public scrutiny.

This included reticence about political opinions, although she seems to have been driven by broadly liberal aspirations. She said she had marched against the war in Iraq, and felt betrayed by Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair: “Did he seduce me? Yes. He, generally speaking, courted my profession. But now I disavow.”

She described Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown, as “the understudy who got the role but didn’t understand it.” She was an enthusiast for Barack Obama.

Some film work followed *The Avengers*, but not as much as Rigg had hoped. That the early casting was inspired by *The Avengers* cannot have helped. Her movie debut, Basil Dearden’s *The Assassination Bureau* (1969), was followed by one of the weaker Bond films.

The underwhelming *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* cast Australian model George Lazenby as Bond in his first feature. In a generous tribute, Lazenby acknowledged that Rigg “undoubtedly raised my acting game.” Their relationship on set was reputedly difficult, although both denied she chewed garlic before the love scenes.

The few films included some interesting pieces, like *The Hospital* (Arthur Hiller, 1971), with a script by Paddy Chayefsky. Rigg also brought her classical skills to Charlton Heston’s starry but undistinguished *Julius Caesar* (Stuart Burge, 1970). A theatrical “commercial” debut—as Heloise opposite Keith Michell’s Abelard—played London and Broadway but was not universally received enthusiastically.

Although she may have been disappointed at the lack of films, she continued to find interesting work. In 1972, she appeared in the National Theatre’s premiere of Tom Stoppard’s philosophical comedy *Jumpers* to great acclaim.

She played Lady Macbeth opposite Anthony Hopkins just when he was beginning to tire of the theatre (1973), to neither of their benefits. More successful was a revival of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* the following year.

During this period she began her brilliant association with classical French drama and Leeds poet Tony Harrison’s theatrical adaptations. In 1973 she appeared in Harrison’s rhymed version of Molière’s *The Misanthrope*. She revisited her Raj upbringing for Harrison’s *Phaedra Britannica*

(1975), which transplanted Racine to India.

There was also television, with classical and theatrical work like Noël Coward’s *The Marquise* and Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* and *Little Eyolf*, alongside literary adaptations like Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1985). She returned to Harrison, appearing as Clytemnestra in his exceptional reworking of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy.

The sheer volume of television work guarantees that not all of it can be outstanding, but there were good turns as Mrs Danvers in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1997) and as the obsessive mother in *Mother Love* (1989), for which she won a BAFTA Best Actress.

Rigg’s directness and coolness suited her admirably to early twentieth century authors like Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and Shaw. They also fitted well the heightened rhetoric of the French classical authors and Greek tragedians. There were notable triumphs as Euripides’s *Medea* (1991), which she called “the happiest time of my professional career,” and in Racine’s *Phèdre*, in a version by poet Ted Hughes, and *Britannicus* (1998). She was also praised for performances of Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams.

Her 2008 *Cherry Orchard* in Chichester was not a success, but she returned magnificently to *Pygmalion* in 2011.

This was one of her last stage roles, although television work continued—in *Game of Thrones*, as well as the charming comedy *Detectorists*, among much else.

In 1994, she had spoken of her “appetite now for really good work in the final third of my life,” describing the theatre as “home ... I don’t belong anywhere else.” The outstanding achievement of Diana Rigg’s life was to demonstrate that a great theatre actor can move to other media without losing the qualities that made them great in the first place.

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