Maggie Smith (1934-2024): “I don’t tolerate fools, but then they don’t tolerate me”

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The actress Maggie Smith wore lightly the burdensome role of being a national treasure. She had become the go-to period dowager, able to convey class and skewering wit with pinpoint accuracy. A great actor of advanced age will be immediately known for their work in more recent blockbusters, like *Downton Abbey* and the *Harry Potter* films, but with Smith there was an immense amount more to celebrate.

If there was anything formulaic in some of the work she was offered in later years, it did not affect her accomplishment. Her comedic talent and sharpness were paired with real depth. Even in second-rate stuff she could be hugely moving.

She had little time for celebrity, saying: “One went to school, one wanted to act, one started to act and one’s still acting.”

Margaret Natalie Smith was born in 1934 in Ilford, on the outskirts of London, the youngest of three children. Shortly before the war the family moved to Oxford, where her father worked as a technician in a pathology laboratory.

Her background has been described as “Spartan, though certainly not deprived.” Critic Michael Coveney argued that her performance in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) was modelled on the “icy temperament and brusque organisational manner” of her mother Meg, a Scottish Presbyterian.

There was a religious strictness in the family, and Maggie’s brother Ian said she had “a very rigid, inflexible upbringing and a humourless childhood.” It is possible to see her response to this upbringing in the qualities she brought to her performances.

The determination to act appeared early and she never wavered. She left Oxford High School for Girls aged 16 to train at the Oxford Playhouse Theatre School. Oxford was a fertile training ground, with wide opportunities in professional and student productions with much crossover between them. At 18 she appeared as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, with future Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) stalwart John Wood as Malvolio.

She appeared in many revues, which not only gave her a professional opening but also honed the verbal and comedic skill she turned to dramatic advantage.

The critic Harold Hobson saw her in Michael Meyer’s *The Ortolan*, and his enthusiasm led to her working with the future RSC directors Peter Hall and Peter Wood. Hall recognised her quality but misjudged her ability: “I didn’t think she would develop the range that she subsequently has,” he said.

The underestimation seems based on her lighter work. She turned professional in 1956 with a Broadway debut in revue. A year later she was the leading comedienne opposite Kenneth Williams in Bamber Gascoigne’s *Share My Lettuce* in the West End. The famously miserable Williams was not only impressed—“That girl has magic,” he wrote—but enjoyed her company.

She was accused of having imitated Williams’s distinctively exaggerated diction. She certainly learned a great deal about working on a script from his technical expertise, but said she had “never thought of colouring things as vividly as Kenneth does.” Williams, a talented comedian, found himself reduced almost to self-parody in the British “*Carry On*” film series for which he is held in great affection by many. Smith, by contrast, sought to apply this highly articulated sharpness to give her characters greater weapons.

It equipped her superbly for the Restoration comedy which marked some peaks of her 1960s classical stage work, although she was never constrained by genres. In 1960, she had taken over from Joan Plowright in the West End transfer of the Royal Court production of Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*. Her first major West End success came the following year in Jean Anouilh’s *The Rehearsal*.

She moved adeptly from Restoration drama to Shakespeare to modern plays. Peter Shaffer’s double-bill *The Private Ear and the Public Eye*, which brought the first of her five *Evening Standard* awards, reunited her with Williams. Peter Wood described them as “like greyhounds, the speed at which they could bat and ball it.”

Her range impressed, and in 1963 Laurence Olivier employed her as one of the original 12 contracted artists for his National Theatre season at the Old Vic. Her revue-inflected pace alarmed Olivier, with his more modulated classical delivery.

She bookended her time at the National with fine Restoration performances. In 1963, her first performance with future husband Robert Stephens was as Silvia in George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer*. The couple married in 1967. She concluded her time at the National with more Farquhar, playing Mrs Sullen in *The Beaux Stratagem* (1970). There are clips of some of those performances in the remarkable 2018 documentary *Tea With The Dames*, a discussion between Smith, Plowright and old friends Judi Dench and Eileen Atkins.

She was a moving Desdemona to Olivier’s *Othello*, earning an Oscar nomination for the subsequent film. There were impressive performances in Ibsen (including Ingmar Bergman’s 1970 production of *Hedda Gabler*), Strindberg, Noël Coward, Shaffer

and Shakespeare, playing opposite Stephens in *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

Her skills equipped her well for filmmaking, and she had already proved an intimidating supporting player. Richard Burton complained that in *The VIPs* (1963) she had not just stolen the scene but "committed grand larceny." There was an important appearance in *Oh! What A Lovely War* (1969), the same year she took centre stage in her own right. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, directed by Ronald Neame, remains outstanding, with Smith's compelling performance deservedly earning an Oscar.

Jay Presson Allen's screenplay developed her own earlier theatre adaptation of Muriel Spark's novel, which starred Vanessa Redgrave in its West End debut. (Smith nicknamed Redgrave "the Red Snapper")

Jean Brodie is a mistress at a 1930s Edinburgh girls' school, who initially appears sympathetically idiosyncratic. She believes she is in her prime and irreplaceable, cultivating a "Brodie Set" of favoured pupils she regards as the "crème de la crème." As the film unfolds, her idiosyncrasy is shown as an acutely reactionary manipulativeness, expressed in her dictum, "Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life."

In practice this means engineering an affair between a pupil and the art teacher and going off-curriculum to push the girls towards sharing her admiration for Mussolini and Franco. The result is the death of one girl who leaves for Spain to join her brother, who she believes is fighting for the fascists but who is actually opposing them. The film's great strength, which hinges on Smith's performance, is to show the malign but real influence of a deeply flawed individual. It is worth seeing.

In later work, when she frequently became the personification of the British aristocracy, Smith would deal again with those attitudes, but films like Zeffirelli's less satisfactory *Tea With Mussolini* (1999) seldom show *Jean Brodie*'s sharpness. Better was Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001), which attempted to use the country-house murder genre for an upstairs/downstairs view of class relations.

The relationship with Stephens deteriorated, but they continued to work together in award-winning productions. Stephens said of Coward's *Private Lives*, for which Smith won the Variety Club best actress award, that their handling of the dialogue's sharpness was "just how we talked to each other at home." They divorced in 1975 and she married playwright Beverley Cross.

She was still testing her range, calling her classical seasons at Stratford, Ontario "a damned good try at a lot of things that I would probably never be cast for in England." There was Shakespeare, including a 1977 Rosalind in *As You Like It* described by some critics as definitive, and some Chekhov, but back in Britain she focused more on modern work, including a series of important performances in plays by Edward Albee.

She liked theatre's ephemerality: "every performance is like a ghost—it's there and then it's gone." Acting was an impulse, and she had to keep going. Her eldest son, actor Chris Larkin, said she was "almost terrifyingly sanguine about critics, success, failure. She doesn't worry at all and simply says you can only do what you do."

Neil Simon proved a sympathetic film writer for her comic talent. *Murder By Death* (1976) parodies celebrated fictional detectives, with a fine cast. Smith and David Niven play Dick and Dora Charleston, modelled on Dashiell Hammett's *Thin Man* characters. It is light stuff but done well and with considerable effect.

Simon's *California Suite* (1978) brought Smith a second Oscar, for best actress in a supporting role. Her character was on her way to the Oscars, where she would end up losing. Her line "Eight years with the National Theatre, two Pinters, nine Shakespeares, three Shaws and I finally get nominated for a nauseating little comedy" rings true of some of her own career. Here, as so often, she was far and away the best thing on screen.

Smith continued to probe depths of sadness magnificently, including the title character in *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1987). This reunited her with director Jack Clayton, with whom she made the Harold Pinter-scripted *The Pumpkin Eater* in 1964.

She identified the qualities that contributed to this depth: "It's true I don't tolerate fools, but then they don't tolerate me, so I am spiky. Maybe that's why I'm quite good at playing spiky elderly ladies."

This combination of lonely depth and comic genius made her a perfect fit for Alan Bennett's sometimes cosily sentimental writing, to which she brought real heartbreak. She appeared in his original *Talking Heads* monologue series (1988), before playing *The Lady in the Van* (2015, from the 1999 play), an autobiographical piece about a former nun who lived in a van in Bennett's front garden. Smith and Alex Jennings (as Bennett) rather transcend the material.

Through her great abilities she had become identified with period drama, saying in 1993, "I can't remember when I last appeared in modern dress." This was not always a constraint. She was a very good Betsey Trotwood in a BBC *David Copperfield* (1999). But even in work that is not of the most enduring quality, her performances provide something enormously valuable, technically and artistically, for younger artists.