

## Drama Queen

**Dame Eileen Atkins' life has been more densely plotted than any of her many stage triumphs, from her battle with cancer, to near bankruptcy and an errant husband. Nick Curtis meets her as she returns to the West End.**



Some people think Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is heavy going. Dame Eileen Atkins considers it light relief. True, Lindsay Posner's Birmingham Rep revival of the 1958 drama, which opens at the Duchess Theatre next week, retains a pungent air of menace. But there is also black humour in the tale of young Stanley (Paul Ritter) inexplicably interrogated by two heavies in a seaside boarding house. And the part of Meg, Stanley's addled, flirtatious landlady, gives Atkins, 70, a rare chance to show off her impeccable comic timing.

With her passionate intensity, drawn face and raw-boned form, Atkins tends to play women who are tormented, desperate, desolate. From her breakthrough parts, as the lesbian simpleton Childie in *The Killing Of Sister George* in 1965, and Elizabeth I in *Vivat! Vivat! Regina* in 1970, to her later involvement with the works and the character of Virginia Woolf, this daughter of a Tottenham gas-meter reader has apparently been cursed by lofty seriousness.

'Oh yes,' says Atkins, rolling her protuberant eyes extravagantly, 'on stage, I am endlessly wracked, and usually endlessly posh. Last year I was offered five plays. Four of them were about women dying of cancer, and the fifth was a Greek tragedy. I thought, "Oh please..."' Meg, by contrast, is simple, blithely unaffected by reality, and very

familiar to Atkins. 'She comes from where I come from.' She was tempted, she says, to make Meg more nuanced, but Pinter dissuaded her. 'He said, "Eileen, did I see shades in your performance? Get rid of them She's stupid! She doesn't know anything!"'

Atkins laughs. She is, as countless journalists before me have noted, nothing like a dame. She has a pert, flirty manner at odds with her years, and retains the feistiness of the self-made girl from a council estate. Less than two weeks ago, she did a tap dance in aid of the tsunami appeal alongside all the other theatrical dames, also performing a rap written by her oldest friend, Jean Marsh. Atkins and Marsh were born just weeks and streets apart in 1934, and though they would later go on to win fame both as actors and as co-conceivers of the TV series *Upstairs Downstairs* and *House Of Elliot*, they started out as child dancers.

Atkins' father was 44 when she was born, her mother - a morbidly obese seamstress and barmaid who had lost one of her two sons in infancy - was 46. Although Atkins is refreshingly candid about having 'nothing in common' with either parent, they doted on her. 'They thought I was terribly pretty,' she says. They set her hair in blonde ringlets and sent her out to do saucy routines in working men's clubs, which she hated. 'Even then, I knew it was wrong to put a child in frilly knickers on a table.' One dance teacher 'fiddled about' with her ('I'm reluctant to call it child abuse,' she maintains matter-of-factly) but another offered to adopt her (her parents declined) and paid for her to go to a decent primary school.

'It was school that saved me,' says Atkins. At Latimer Grammar, to which she won a scholarship, her drama teacher, an unfrocked priest called Mr Burton, encouraged her to act. 'He was a mad difficult bugger, and he fancied me, but what he did for me was fantastic,' she says.

She won a place at the Guildhall school and attended acting classes on the sly, teaching dance to make ends meet. She had, she says, a whole bag of chips on her shoulder in those days, didn't know how to dress and had never tasted coffee. When she fast met her future friend and frequent co-star Vanessa Redgrave at Stratford in the Fifties, she bitterly resented Redgrave's dynastic heritage.

At 22, Atkins married actor Julian Glover - 'I didn't realise it at the time, but I did it to get away from home' - who supported her financially and emotionally through her unsuccessful twenties. 'He told me every day I was a great actress. She was 31 before she won the *Evening Standard* Award for *The Killing Of Sister George*, and took the play to Broadway, where a newly celebrated Dustin Hoffman sent his mother to the stage door to ask her out ('I thought that was the weirdest thing, so I turned him down'). The following year, her

marriage to Glover ended after he had an affair with Sarah Miles. 'I wanted to kill her at the time, but she actually did us a favour by insisting that he left me,' she says. 'Also, she was instrumental in getting me the part of Elizabeth opposite her [as Mary] in *Vivat!* because she wanted to show him she was a better actress than me.' She and Glover remain close friends.

In the Seventies and Eighties, she took leading roles at the National, at the RSC and in the West End. There were big parts in TV and small parts in film. There were long relationships with Edward Fox and with a married American, now dead, who she will not name out of respect to his family. In 1978, at 43, she met advertising director Bill Shepherd in a lift, and they married three weeks later and have been together ever since. 'The secret of a long marriage?' she says. 'Well, we've only done 27 years, but I think it's marrying someone you really, truly like.'

In 1989, she created a one-woman show based on Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own*. It was a huge success in America, and led to a two-hander, *Vita And Virginia*, which Atkins created from Woolf's correspondence with Vita Sackville-West, and which she performed in London on Broadway. She then wrote a screenplay for Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*, with Vanessa Redgrave in the lead and Shepherd producing. It was then that she was diagnosed with breast cancer, had a lumpectomy, and flew home for six months' chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

But as her cancer treatment ended, and she took to the National stage opposite Redgrave again in Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, half the funding for *Mrs Dalloway* collapsed, leaving Shepherd liable. 'I'm amazed I didn't get cancer again,' Atkins says. 'Here I was, playing a bankrupt's wife, in a building with at least five actors from the film, including Vanessa.' Shepherd staved off the repossession of their riverside home in Chiswick by giving their main creditor a Boudin oil painting, and the film was eventually completed, winning Atkins another *Evening Standard* Award, 'the one I'm proudest of'. The 2001 bestowal of damehood pleased her too, of course, and did a lot to eradicate the last of those working-class chips, but Atkins notes that it's 'a f\*\*\*ing cheek' that actresses are the only ones omitted from an annual dinner for British dames.

Even now, enobled and seven years on from the financial disaster of *Mrs Dalloway*, Atkins can't afford to stop work. Does she regret that her personality and her physiognomy kept her primarily in the theatre, rather than more lucrative areas of performance? 'There's absolutely nothing I feel I've missed,' she says, 'although it's a bit of a bore that I will only put a certain number of elite bums on seats because I'm not a film star and I

haven't done a TV series. But I've always done interesting parts, and I get huge pleasure out of what I do.' She did lose out on a big film role in order to do *The Birthday Party*, though. 'Ah well,' she says, all Tottenham pragmatism again. 'I'm having fun, so who gives a f\*\*\*?'

- *The Birthday Party*, previewing from Wed 20 Apr, first night Mon 25Apr, Duchess Theatre, Catherine Street, WC2 (0870 8901103).

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