



ORPHEUS DESCENDING

By Tennessee Williams

INTERVIEW WITH IMOGEN STUBBS

Imogen Stubbs has previously appeared at the Royal Exchange Theatre in PRIVATE LIVES. For Autumn 2012, she is returning to the Royal Exchange to undertake the difficult, complex character of LADY TORRANCE in ORPHEUS DESCENDING. She took a few minutes out of the busy rehearsals to talk to us about this challenging role.

Q. Where do you start when tackling a role like this?

I met up with the Director, Sarah Frankcom, and we started on a basic level with the accent. The character is Italian and so I'm doing it in an Italian accent. Everyone else in the play is deep south and so one of the tricky things is trying to hang on to the accent. Even if logically the character may have lost her accent, she's actually held onto it to make up for the loss of her family. She has resolutely held on to her Italian culture. She's keeping her family alive. She gets more and more Italian as the play goes on until eventually she's almost wrapped up in the flag in order to reassert her 'otherness'. The rest, I find out by working with the cast during rehearsal. That's why I love theatre. Rehearsal is the process of answering the riddle of the character. On TV and film, often you don't rehearse so you just have to come up with something. Often they just use the first take, so it's difficult to have a complex character because you just feel like you're 'playing the lines' and you are quite insecure because you may not have rehearsed. As a result you can feel very much on your own and you end up making the easiest decisions, going with the safest choice. Yet the most interesting acting is when you are brave enough to make a fool of yourself.

Is it a difficult discipline to maintain an accent that is so different to your own?
It's very easy to become hostage to an accent, especially deep south. I've done A

STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE and THE GLASS MENAGERIE and it's such a particular way of speaking. It's so unlike the way we speak. It's quite seductive but you can get slightly impaled by the accent and then you can become stuck in one rhythm. In this play I get to play something else and it's a nice contrast to everyone else.



Imogen Stubbs as Lady Torrance (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

Does your experience and reputation give you a confidence coming into a big complex role like this, or do you still feel the pressure?

Two people who have played this part in the last 30 years are Helen Mirren and Vanessa Redgrave. They are pretty hard acts to follow. Also, the reason the play isn't done much is because it's tricky. I think I have a quality that is in the script - if I can pull it off. If you look at the description, the character is 35 - 45 years old. I am at the top end of that, but supposedly when she's happy, Lady can look 35. I can do that, because I'm girlish rather than womanly. In this play, it's like Tennessee Williams is asking for the woman who still has the child in them. Lady has had a lot beaten out of her by life, but the little girl that she talks about so much is still in there and that come out towards the end. I think Lady has kept the young girl inside her alive partly to preserve the memory of her family and this man (Val) brings it out of her. For a woman of my age it's great because Tennessee Williams writes wonderful characters, but it always comes with the shadow that you're normally playing someone in love with a much younger man that wouldn't look twice at you in real life (laughs). You're old enough to be his mother!

ORPHEUS DESCENDING runs at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 24 October - 24 November 2012.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833
royalexchange.co.uk/orpheus

Introducing ORPHEUS DESCENDING
Wednesday 7 November, 10am – 12pm
Pre-Show Workshop for schools, community groups and individuals who have booked to see the show.

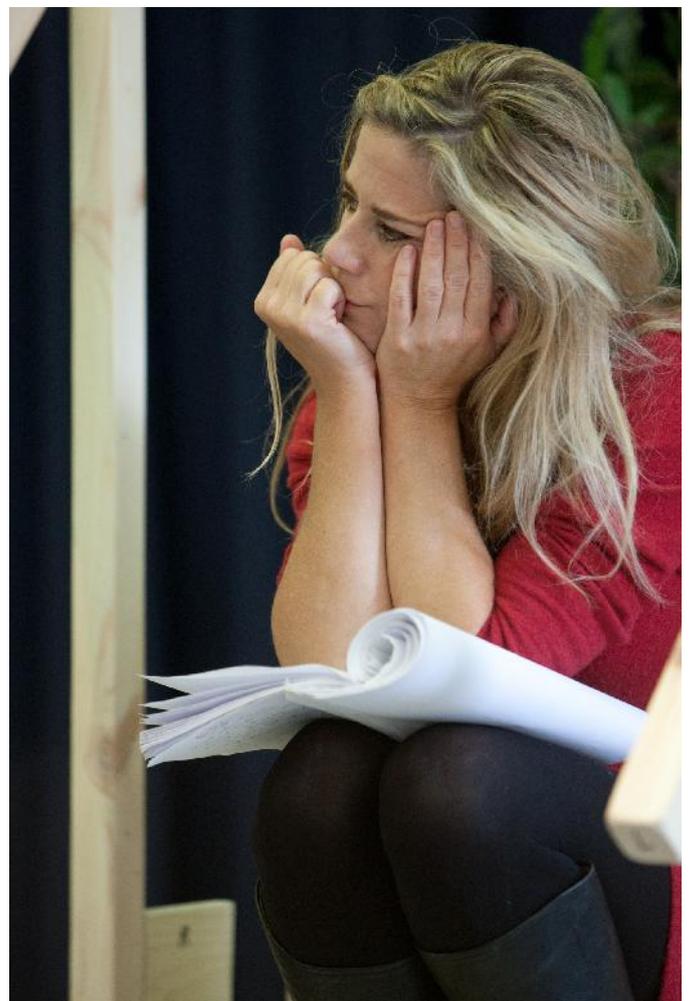
£8 / £6 (all concessions & group leaders);
Book on 0161 833 9833

2 x 2 Between The Lines (18yrs - adult)
Wednesdays 14 & 21 November, 11am – 1pm
A pair of discussion, playreading and talk-based sessions to accompany ORPHEUS DESCENDING.

£12 for 2 sessions; Book on 0161 833 9833

What advice would you give to young people who are wanting to become actors/performers?

I think it is very hard for young actors these days, because there are so many of them. Also, there is a real pressure now on how people look. Actors these days are intimidated by the tyranny of appearance, thanks to things like HD TV because it's brutal and cruel and I fear for the amount of people who rush into things like plastic surgery. I think it's important for young people to love and embrace theatre and not always just think about TV acting. Also, to push to play character and not just the obvious 'self'. Keep pushing yourselves, elaborating on yourselves as performers, and people with a skill. I think you also need to have other strings to your bow. I don't know many actors who can survive on what they earn as an actor alone. You need to develop other things, other talents so that at worst acting is a hobby, and there's nothing wrong with that. At its best it's your job but you supplement it with other things.



Imogen Stubbs in rehearsal for ORPHEUS DESCENDING (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)