Judi Dench stands along with three other great Dames – Ellen Terry, Edith Evans and Peggy Ashcroft – in the line of women performers of Shakespeare over the past century. As an older contemporary of Dame Judi, I have been able to see many of her performances, some of them several times, and have reviewed some for the press. I have taken part in discussions with her before groups of students and members of the general public, and I have had the privilege of being able to talk to her informally about her work. She is modest, self-deprecating and private, not given to theorizing about her professional activities, or indeed to talking much about herself. Her intelligence is great but it is intuitive rather than analytical. She has written little about her approach to her art. There are some published interviews, and she is named as the author of a delightful if anecdotal essay, ‘A Career in Shakespeare’, published in 1996 (it was I believe transcribed and edited from an interview by Professor Russell Jackson). And though popular biographies and a celebratory volume – Darling Judi, edited by John Miller, 2004 – which includes illuminating essays by practitioners with whom she has worked, such as Peter Hall, Gregory Doran, Richard Eyre and Trevor Nunn have been published, I know of only one extended study of her as a Shakespeare actress, the excellent final chapter of Russ McDonald’s book Look to the Lady: Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judi Dench on the Shakespearean Stage (2005). There are also, besides the usual reviews in newspapers and periodicals, longer studies of individual productions in which she has appeared including a chapter on John Barton’s Twelfth Night in my Royal Shakespeare: Studies of Four Major Productions at Stratford-upon-Avon (1977) and Tirzah Lowen’s Peter Hall Directs Antony and Cleopatra (1990), which gives a detailed, day-by-day account of the production in rehearsal.

Judi Dench developed an interest in the theatre as a child. She had ambitions as a ballet dancer, and saw school performances of Shakespeare given by her elder brother Jeffery, who also became a professional actor. As a schoolgirl she played her first Titania, as well as Ariel in The Tempest and the Queen in Richard II, and she took part in the York Mystery Plays, for which her mother was wardrobe mistress. At first, however, she wanted to be a stage designer, and enrolled at an art school in her home town of York with this in mind. Still uncertain about a career, she followed her brother as a student at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London where, after a shaky start, she graduated with a first class degree and won a
gold medal as outstanding student of her year. Already she had worked with Cicely Berry as voice trainer, as she was to continue to do especially in her years with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her debut performances as Ophelia at the Old Vic in 1957 were harshly criticized in the press: Richard Findlater called it a debacle. But she was learning fast. In an interview some twenty years later she said:

When I was first at the Old Vic in 1957 I played Ophelia. It was during the Asian flu epidemic which I caught, and I walked on to the stage and played the nunnery scene with tears streaming down my face. When I came off, John Neville, who was playing Hamlet, came up and really shook me and said ‘Never do that again! The audience comes to see Shakespeare’s Hamlet and you’re privileged to be playing Ophelia. Don’t think they come to see you with the flu or in tears because one of your family has died, or because you’ve got a headache, or that you can’t be bothered.’ I thought at the time that that was a very harsh thing to do. I realize now that it was one of the most extraordinary and marvellous discipline lessons.

(Wells, 1976, p. 82)

She was replaced by another, slightly older actor, Barbara Jefford, when the production went on tour in America. But she persevered, playing Maria in Twelfth Night and other roles at the Old Vic in London and on Broadway.

Her performance a little later as Juliet in Zeffirelli’s Old Vic production of 1960 appears to have forced her to think hard about the balance in classical acting between psychological verisimilitude and the demands of poetic drama. The production’s innovative nature, with an emphasis on adolescent passion and Italianate verismo, caused it initially to receive bad reviews, with several critics complaining about neglect of the play’s poetry; about one-third of the text was cut. The Times critic wrote ‘Miss Judi Dench and Mr John Stride are young players who act their parts competently but cannot yet make anything like constant touch with the poetry within them’ (qu. Miller, 1998, p. 46). Dench herself has said that Zeffirelli ‘had no respect for the verse at all, and cut it appallingly, hacking at it, for which he was rightly criticized. He left the text to the actors, and it didn’t survive at all well’ (McDonald, 2005, p. 116). But the production’s fortunes changed when Kenneth Tynan wrote that Zeffirelli had worked ‘a miracle … a revelation, even perhaps a revolution … so abundant and compelling was the life on stage that I could not wait to find out what happened next’ (Miller, 1998, p. 47). Judi Dench appears to have taken criticism of the verse speaking to heart in a way that may well have had a formative influence. Interviewed by Gareth Lloyd Evans years later, she said, ‘Although I was learning about the poetry I didn’t understand about it as I understand now, after so many years … Therefore, it took up all our energies, in this production, in order to play the passion and the emotions.’ The passion, she felt, ‘carried it through’ but ‘there were many many people who simply couldn’t take that – because there was no poetry. I would love to play it again … now because I do know about the poetry, and I think I could still retain the passion’ (Lloyd Evans, 1974, p. 138).

In 1961 Judi was invited by Peter Hall to become a founder member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, scoring a great success as Titania in his 1962 production of
A Midsummer Night’s Dream. (She was to reprise the role, also under Hall’s direction and with no less success, in 2010, at the age of 75.) By now, perhaps because of Hall’s influence, her verse speaking was especially commended.

More perhaps than any other major actress in the history of the British theatre, Judi Dench’s career is notable for versatility. She has never been susceptible to type casting. Though some of her greatest successes have been in Shakespeare, she has also acted to acclaim in classic and modern plays covering a wide range of dramatic styles, as well as in musicals and television situation comedies. She has starred in comedies by Ben Jonson, Wycherley, Congreve, Chekhov and Wilde, in Jacobean tragedies by Thomas Middleton and John Webster, in serious dramas by Ibsen and Shaw, Brecht and O’Casey, Pinter, David Hare and Edward Bond, and in light comedies such as Noel Coward’s Hay Fever and Keith Waterhouse’s Mr and Mrs Nobody. On film her roles have ranged from Queen Elizabeth 1 (in Shakespeare in Love), through Queen Victoria (in Mrs Brown), to Iris Murdoch (in Iris). No doubt her breadth of experience in a wide range of drama has fed into her Shakespearian roles, extending her technique and stimulating her imagination.

Inevitably given the theatrical conditions of the time, her career has been largely shaped by external forces. She has not, like an actor manager, been able to determine in which plays she would appear, but rather has responded to the needs of companies for which she has worked, such as the Old Vic, the Oxford and Nottingham Playhouses, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre. A regrettable result of the system is that she has not been given the opportunity to play on stage roles for which she seems well suited such as Rosalind, Cressida and the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet, and that her Volumnia was given only in a limited number of performances in Chichester. And only three of her major Shakespeare roles can be seen on commercially available film – Titania, Lady Macbeth and Adriana in Trevor Nunn’s musical adaptation of The Comedy of Errors. She is however a memorable and moving Mistress Quickly in Kenneth Branagh’s film of Henry V, and can be seen and heard briefly but piercingly as Hecuba in his Hamlet. Notable among audio recordings are her Nurse in Branagh’s Romeo and Juliet and Goneril to John Gielgud’s King Lear. She has of course been able to turn down roles that she did not wish to play, but in responding to invitations she has, it would appear, relied much on the guidance of trusted colleagues, such as Peter Hall, Trevor Nunn, John Barton and Richard Eyre, as well as her late husband, the actor Michael Williams.

Trustling in the judgement of others has often required an exercise of faith, but it has also helped to extend her range in ways that might not have happened without external guidance. She has been willing to take risks, to be cast against type, to defy personal limitations and to spring surprises, even on herself. She has, writes John Miller in relation to her acceptance of a role (which injury forced her to abandon) in the musical Cats, ‘made it a cardinal policy to try to move from a success in one dramatic form to a new challenge as different as possible from the last’ (Miller, 1998, p. 169). And Richard Eyre has written that ‘Every part she takes on has to test her; it has to be something that she thinks she might not be able to do’ (Miller, 2004, p. 40). In a 1974 interview she spoke of having played Lady Macbeth on tour in Africa while saying that she ‘would never be asked’ to play it in England. ‘Nor Cleopatra. That’s not my scene. I wouldn’t know how to approach them, actually’
(Lloyd Evans, 1974, p. 141). In later years she was to triumph in both roles. Similarly with the transition from stage to film. In 1973, asked ‘Have you acted in films?’, she replied ‘Yes. I don’t like it very much’ (Wells, 1976, p. 82). She was to conquer her aversion enough to star later in many films, being nominated for an Oscar six times (so far), and winning one for her Queen Elizabeth in Shakespeare in Love (1998). But she retains her preference for the challenges of theatre. Interviewed by a fellow actor, Oliver Ford-Davies, in 2007, she said ‘In Antony and Cleopatra there was a line I knew should get a laugh, and I couldn’t get it. We did the hundredth performance and that night the laugh came. That’s why the theatre wins over film and television every single time: you get more out of it, and the audience teach you so much’ (Ford-Davies, 2007, p. 218).

Any actor’s career is determined in part by inherent and inescapable physical and intellectual attributes, though these may be extended and developed by training. Judi Dench is short – five feet two inches. There is nothing much she can do about that, as she knows. McDonald writes, ‘Having accepted Peter Hall’s invitation to do Antony and Cleopatra at the National Theatre in 1987, she began the first rehearsal by saying to him “Well, I hope you know what you’re doing. You are setting out to direct Cleopatra with a menopausal dwarf”’ (McDonald, 2005, p. 111). Over the years she has, especially when playing romantic heroines, had to fight a tendency to embonpoint. Her features are regular, her eyes large and expressive. In youth she had a delicate, luminous beauty which has mellowed over the years, her face illuminated by her penetrating intelligence and radiant, often mischievous smile. Though she is not gifted with the ‘voice beautiful’ of the Terry family, she has a wide vocal range of both pitch and volume, along with a huskiness that has been seen as a trademark and as both an asset and a handicap. It is frequently said that a notice appeared outside a theatre in which she was appearing reading ‘Judi Dench does not have a cold, this is her natural speaking voice’; John Miller’s book about her is called Judi Dench: With a Crack in Her Voice.

Throughout the interviews that she gives there runs an emphasis on the actor’s need for training, and especially, in performing Shakespeare, for training in vocal delivery and in understanding the demands of the verse. She has paid tribute to her teachers in this – among them Cicely Berry, John Barton and Peter Hall. She rightly sees herself as the bearer of a tradition, and she can be quite fierce in talking about deficiencies in the voice training offered nowadays to young actors. In both prose and verse, her vocal delivery is of exemplary clarity and energy, reminiscent of that of her great predecessor Peggy Ashcroft. The voice is fully supported and projected. The vowels are pure, the consonants crisp. Every syllable is required to make its contribution. She can speak fast if the situation demands it. Her mental agility means that she can, as her fellow actor Michael Pennington writes, ‘move from a thought to a related half-thought, complicate it with a burst of feeling and move on to a physical action that incorporates all three, like mercury, at the speed of light’ (Miller, 2004, p. 60). For all the speed, however, there is never an impression of unintended haste. In verse, she is conscious of rhythm, but does not overstress it. She knows where the caesura, the break within the verse line, occurs, and she can use it, perhaps with a scarcely perceptible pause, a little silence, that suggests the working of the character’s mind, the thought processes in which meaning and poetry coalesce. She has
often stressed the importance in verse speaking of what musicians call *legato* – the carrying over of the tone from one note or syllable to another, producing an apparently seamless flow of sound. She can convey an impression of this through a technical and imaginative mastery that is a result of a highly developed artistry. Gregory Doran, who directed her as the Countess in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, wrote that:

> to listen to her deliver the text was to hear a master class in Shakespeare’s verse. She would feel the verse line, beating out the iambic rhythm on her hand if in doubt about where the stress lay. And in early stages she would not be able to remember the line if the pulse was wrong. She’d seek to release the easy natural effect of the line endings, never pausing, so much as lifting and considering the end of a line before completing the sense with the next. For example, when the Countess (in Act One, Scene Three) says to Helena as she dissembles her love for Bertram:

> My fear hath catch’d your fondness; now I see
> The mystery of your loneliness, and find
> Your salt tears’ head. Now to all sense ’tis gross:
> You love my son…

at the end of the first line, where others may have run on, Judi would lift the word ‘see’, allowing the next phrase (‘the mystery of your loneliness’) to be considered precisely, and compassionately expressed. And lifting the end of the second line allowed her to land on the next four monosyllables with tough maternal love, leading on to the revelation that she wants to flush out of Helena: ‘You love my son.’

(Miller, 2004, p. 175).

It is often said of her preparation for roles that she does not read in advance the plays in which she is to appear. According to Doran, when he asked her to play the Countess she said ‘I don’t know the play. Never seen it, read it, or been in it. You’re going to have to tell me the story’ (Miller, 2004, p. 171). But this is clearly not always true. Maybe she will sometimes agree to act in a new play of which she has not seen the script, but there are after all times when she has undertaken a role that she has already played before. And nothing should give the impression that she does not prepare seriously for her roles. Absence of preconceptions before rehearsals start may enable her to throw herself the more fully into the creative process once it begins. The work is often done in private, by allowing her subconscious mind to mull over and solve the problems of the rehearsal room. I have been aware sometimes that deep down a process of absorption of a role was taking place. She is a great assimilator. Late in 1986 I saw her and her husband, Michael Williams, in *Mr and Mrs Nobody*, Keith Waterhouse’s dramatization of *The Diary of a Nobody*, by George and Weedon Grossmith. It was an enchanting performance of a delightful if slight comedy of manners. In her dressing room afterwards she told me that her next role was to be Cleopatra, and asked me about the meaning of a line in the play.
Already she was thinking about it, and I have no doubt that the role grew steadily in her imagination as she pursued her daily tasks well before rehearsals began. Seriousness of approach is not however incompatible with a sense of fun. She is a great joker, a giggler, a husky chuckler, and a hearty laughers, famous for the jokes she plays on her fellow actors in rehearsal and even on stage, and for corpsing. She tells of an incident in a performance of The Merchant of Venice:

In the casket scene Michael Williams was standing in the centre of the stage as Bassanio, about to make his choice. There was the wind band at the back of the stage, Peter Geddes as Gobbo, Polly James waiting to sing ‘Tell me where is fancy bred’, and my brother Jeff and Bernard Lloyd as monks. I was supposed to say

I speak too long, ’tis but to peize the time,
To eke it, and to draw it out in length,
To stay you from election.

But I said ‘erection’. The band just put down their instruments and walked off, as did the monks, leaving Polly James to sing on her own. I have never been in such a state, and the scene had only just started.

(Dench, 1996, pp. 204–205)

This irrepressible sense of fun, the lack of self-importance that it betokens, the ability, even the desire, to laugh at herself, is among the qualities that make her a natural team player – and also, ever since she has been a star, the natural leader of any company in which she appears. And jokiness both in rehearsals and during a run may well keep everyone on their toes, militating against staleness.

The seriousness that Judi brings to technical matters of verse speaking is no less apparent in her characterization of roles. She looks for the humanizing touches, the person below the style. This was true even in Trevor Nunn’s farcical musical based on The Comedy of Errors. The performance can be seen on video. A high spot is the wordless interpolated moment when Judi appears on a balcony, impatient for her husband Antipholus to come in to dinner, and sees his identical twin brother, of whose existence she is oblivious, in the courtyard below. Drawing herself up to her full (not very great) height in a wonderfully imperious manner, like a latter-day Sarah Siddons, she glares at the hapless twin, and with a gesture like that of an exasperated traffic policewoman directs him into the house for what can only be going to be an exceedingly uncomfortable confrontation. This is splendid, but Judi knows that farce needs to be grounded in reality, and her performance succeeds in the way in which she underlies the exaggerations required by the production style with touches of true feeling that draw sympathy for Adriana in her plight.

The production style of The Comedy of Errors constricted the play’s emotional range, which though relatively slight makes it so clearly a precursor of Shakespeare’s other play about twins in search of each other and so of themselves, Twelfth Night. Judi played Viola in John Barton’s RSC production 202 times, from October 1969 in Stratford, and later in Australia, then London, Stratford again and finally, in 1972, in
Japan. She has written of her love for this play's 'melancholy. The degrees of love that everyone is in, sometimes with themselves, sometimes with someone else in disguise – and everyone with their idea of love.' 'Shakespeare,' she says, 'takes so many textures of that emotion, and gives it so many forms' (Dench, 1996, p. 202). John Barton spoke in similar terms: '[T]he text contains an enormous range of emotions and moods and most productions seem to select one – farce or bitterness or romance – and emphasize it throughout. I wanted to sound all the notes that are there' (Interview with Barton in Plays and Players, November 1969, p. 49). Many-texturedness is a prime quality of Judi's acting. In writing about this production a year or two after it closed, I tried to suggest something of this in her interpretation of Viola, and about the ways in which she conveyed it through movement, gesture, facial expression and vocal inflection:

When she first appeared at court, Valentine, congratulating Cesario on the Duke's favours, disconcertingly slapped her on the bosom; moments later, when the Duke had entered, he pointed to a stool and pulled it close to him, indicating that Cesario should sit on it; she pulled it away before sitting down; he pulled it back to him. The actress's momentary flinchings, signs of nervousness that would be understandable in a boy newly promoted to favour at court, held an extra dimension of meaning for those who knew the boy was a girl; and so a bond of complicity was entered into with the audience. Left onstage at the end of the scene, she could reveal to us her sympathetic amusement at her own situation: 'Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife.' There was intelligent irony as well as wistfulness in the delivery of the line, showing us Viola's independent resilience as well as her affectionate nature. In her next scene with the Duke, we were given an initial reminder of the true situation as he pulled her stool towards him and held on to her to prevent her moving away, but the scene was played for its full emotional power. Judi Dench spoke her lines about 'Patience on a Monument' with a quietly beautiful intensity, and late in the scene there came a brilliant fusion of a comic apprehension of an irony with a sense of deep emotion. 'But died thy sister of her love, my boy?', asked Orsino. 'I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers, too . . .', replied Cesario; and a tiny pause followed by a catch in the voice took us movingly from the fictional situation of Viola speaking equivocally to conceal her own disguise, to the reality of the situation in which she genuinely believed that she had lost her brother.

(Wells, 1977, p. 50)

A studio recording of part of the scene made by Judi many years later, in 1998 (Shakespeare His Life and Work, 2 CDs), permits an analysis of how she spoke it. The voice is fresh, every syllable clear, but there is no hint of oratory. She opens in an almost casual, story-telling mode:

My [emphasis on both 'My' and 'fa-'] father had a daughter [emphasis on 'daugh-'] loved a man [distinct pause],

As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman [upward inflection, a smile in the voice, expressive of the impossibility],
I [slight emphasis] should your lordship.
ORSINO And what’s her history?
VIOLA [slight pause, lowering of the tone and volume] A blank, my lord.
    [Momentary pause] She never told [emphasis on ‘told’] her love,
But let concealment, [barely perceptible pause at the caesura] like a worm
i’t’hbud, [slight pause]
Feed on her damask cheek. [Longer pause] She pined [the voice opens out on
the vowel, pace reduces] in thought, [slight pause]
And with a green and yellow melancholy, [pause at the end only of this and the
following line, upward inflection on the last syllable]
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling [emphasis on ‘smi-’] at grief. [Pause] Was not this [slight pause] love
[emphasized] indeed?
[Pace picks up] We men may say more, swear more, but indeed
Our shows are more than will; for still we [slightly emphasized] prove
Much in our vows, but little in our love. [Emphasis points the antithesis of
‘vows’ and ‘love’]
ORSINO But died thy sister of her love, my boy?
VIOLA I am all the daughters of my father’s house, [pause at the end only of
this line]
And all the brothers too; [pause; volume reduces, last words whispered as if to
herself] and yet I know not.

This analysis, crude though it is, may help to demonstrate something of the technical
basis of Judi’s speaking, showing the use she can make of her awareness of the way
the verse works, of how observance of line endings, of caesuras (when they exist),
and of antithesis (on which John Barton, very rightly, never tires of insisting) can
help the performer to release the full emotional and intellectual potential of the
lines.

The thoughtfulness that Judi brings to the preparation of a role can result in
interesting freshness of interpretation. When she came to play Beatrice in John Bar-
ton’s 1976 Much Ado About Nothing, also for the RSC, she softened the character’s
asperities by picking up on the suggestions in the text that Beatrice and Benedick had
had a love affair in the past. The key line comes in response to Don Pedro’s words
‘Come, lady, come, you have lost the heart of Signor Benedick.’ ‘Indeed, my lord’,
she replies, ‘he lent it me a while, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his
single one. Marry, once before he won it of me, with false dice.’ When I mentioned
to Judi that the line was often omitted, she replied that she had agreed to take the
role only on condition that it was retained. It was part and parcel of her portrayal of
Beatrice as a woman of some maturity, of a wisdom born of not entirely happy
experience. There was enormous fun in her performance – the slightly bawdy
comedy of the scene (3.4) with her girl friends, in which she has a cold, was as funny as
I have ever seen it – but the ground bass of seriousness had been sounded again at
the end of the second deception scene, when she emerges from hiding after hearing
herself criticized. ‘What fire is in mine ears?’ she says. ‘Can this be true? / Stand I
condemned for pride and scorn so much?’ I have heard the speech spoken farcically,
but Judi knew better than this. Written in the form of an abbreviated sonnet, it is a turning point in the action:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?  
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?  
Contempt, farewell; and maiden pride, adieu.  
No glory lives behind the back of such.  
And, Benedick, love on. I will requite thee,  
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.  
If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee  
To bind our loves up in a holy band.  
For others say thou dost deserve, and I  
Believe it better than reportingly.

(3.1.107–116)

Responding to the speech’s lyrical style, Judi, with a tenderness that did not deny an element of self-mockery, nevertheless showed that this is a response to a learning experience, that Beatrice is a wiser woman at the end of the scene than she had been at its beginning.

Judi’s mastery of verse speaking is recognized by other members of the profession. A colleague, Dearbhla Molloy, cast as Lady Macbeth, writes that ‘I rang Judi and asked her if she’d teach me how to speak the verse, which she did. We didn’t use Macbeth as the text, for obvious reasons, we used Cleopatra, which she was playing at the time. I wrote down the rules that she gave me:

1 Remember it’s a play, not reality.  
2 Obey the metre.  
3 Start scenes.  
4 Earn a pause.  
5 Don’t separate.  
6 Drive through the speech.  
7 Antithesis, pauses up at the end of lines.  
8 Economy, simplicity, and negotiate with humour.  
9 You don’t have to carry the message, the play does it for you.  
10 Trust the play, and your casting.

(Miller, 1998, p. 221–222)

Most of these maxims are clear – ‘start scenes’, I understand, is shorthand for ‘if you speak first in a scene, give it a kick start’. Though the advice clearly reflects Dame Judi’s long experience, it also echoes to some degree advice given to her by the director of the production, Peter Hall, who has indeed been a lifelong mentor. She has said: ‘When we did Antony and Cleopatra Peter Hall gave me the two best notes I’ve ever had. First, remember you don’t have to play the whole of the character in each scene. You may only have to play a very small aspect of the character, and then at the end the character should be whole. Second, remember not everybody speaks the truth about your character’ (Ford-Davies, 2007, p. 217).
For all the emphasis that Judi herself, as well as those who write about her acting, has placed on her mastery of the speaking of both verse and prose, she is a mistress too of body language. I felt this in her performance of Perdita in Trevor Nunn’s production of The Winter’s Tale (in which she also played a gravely beautiful Hermione). Her dancing in the pastoral scene was imbued with a kind of innocent eroticism, a rapt enjoyment of the music and of the sensuous movement of her own limbs that fully justified Florizel’s praise:

When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o’th’sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that, move still, still so,
And own no other function.

(4.4.140–143)

Body language seemed especially important too, not least because it assisted depth and originality of interpretation, when Judi moved to the National Theatre to play Gertrude in Richard Eyre’s 1989 production of Hamlet. I saw the play on its first night, when Daniel Day-Lewis played Hamlet—after withdrawing from the production he was succeeded by Jeremy Northam, and then by the dying Ian Charleson. In response, perhaps, to the broad dimensions of the Olivier stage and auditorium the play was performed in a presentational manner, formal rather than intimate. Characters stood far apart, speaking often with little or no movement, facing out to the audience rather than addressing one another. This production style held the audience at arm’s length, encouraging observant neutrality rather than involvement in the characters’ emotions and in the excitement of the action. Only in the closet scene between Gertrude and Hamlet did body language come into full play. As Hamlet’s passion mounted he bestraddled his mother; her evident tenderness for him sought physical expression, and their climactic kiss was a naked and mutual acknowledgement of desire that shocked her. She addressed ‘What shall I do?’ to herself, acknowledging the discovery within herself of depths she could not fathom. As Hamlet left she collapsed, and for the rest of the play was a broken woman. Judi’s acting communicated emotional complexity with great economy of means, and set the play’s heart beating as it had not done until that point.

Economy is indeed a keynote of her acting, nowhere better exemplified than in the final scene of All’s Well that Ends Well. As its director writes, ‘The Countess says nothing when Helena returns, as if from the dead, at the end of the play. Her new daughter-in-law turns to the Countess with the line, ‘Oh, my dear mother, do I see you living?’ There is no reply. There can’t be. Judi’s choice was for the Countess to stare at Helena, almost unable to move, and finally, slowly turned her outstretched hands palm up to signal silent welcome, acceptance, and profound relief. It was a moment to haunt you with its stillness, and she created it with such economy and truth, the effect was devastating’ (Doran in Miller, 2004, p. 177).

In the event, the Shakespeare role that gave Judi the greatest scope for the full range of her talents is the one she thought she would never play, Cleopatra. In Hall’s 1987 production she embraced its challenges and opportunities with joyous acceptance of all it has to offer, extending herself into every aspect of the role, from the
sordid to the sublime, while never losing the sense of a unifying self that could encompass the character’s ‘infinite variety’. Tirzah Lowen’s book is revealing about the relationship between actor, role, company and director during the rehearsal process. ‘When not in a scene, Judi Dench sits quietly in a corner, blocking out distraction as she studies her lines.’ She is ‘Wholly still and focused.’ Day by day she ‘is absorbing the many facets of the character, and tapping her own qualities to give them substance: the energy, the quick intelligence and wit, the “gutsiness”, the femininity, the playfulness, the authority, the pensiveness and vulnerability.’ But preparation for the role is not an entirely solitary process. ‘Both on and offstage, a warm relationship with Cleopatra’s entourage has developed (and it is not surprising to learn, later, that it is with the Cleopatra who had the common touch and inspired great loyalty … that Dench most identifies’) (Lowen, 1990, pp. 57–58).

There are links with the past. Peter Hall had spoken to Peggy Ashcroft, who had played the role with Michael Redgrave as Antony to great acclaim thirty-five years previously, and did not underestimate its difficulties: ‘You know you’ll never get there, but it’s quite clear where you’re going’ (Lowen, 1990, p.23). And Judi herself spoke to her great predecessor, gaining insight into the emotions behind the words: ‘in reply to Antony’s taunt that she save herself by sending his grizzled head to Caesar, Cleopatra’s “That head, my lord?” should contain all her love for him’ (Lowen, 1990, p. 80). Clearly too she had great confidence in her director, learning from him while also maintaining her independence.

All this showed in her performance. From her first appearance this was clearly a woman of volatile passions, physically restless, richly sensual yet with a shrewd, instinctive intelligence that probed suspiciously, vulnerably, behind the appearances with which she was presented. She realized the comedy of the role with perfect timing and brilliant transitions. As she questioned the messenger about Octavia, her self-confidence grew until, as he said ‘I do think she’s thirty’, the smile froze on her face and, gathering her skirts, she swirled abruptly around, ran towards the door, and almost left the stage. The poetry of the role, too, was fully realized, climactically when, her restlessness subdued, she spoke ‘I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony …’ with rapt, hushed lyricism to a Dolabella who stood in the auditorium aisle with his back to us, so that she was addressing us as well as him. The audience’s silence was palpable. We were united in a single emotional response. This was great acting achieved through a perfection of vocal technique along with the highest physical economy.

An actor is nothing without an audience. Judi Dench’s long love affair with those who come to see her act is reflected in the admiration and affection in which she is held by countless admirers. The generosity of her art reflects and is enabled by the generosity of a great spirit. She is the best loved English actress since Ellen Terry, and her success on stage, like Ellen Terry’s, is indivisible from the personality that enables it.

Chronology (concentrating on Shakespeare)

Born York, 1934
1957 debut with the Old Vic Company playing Ophelia, etc.
1960 Juliet in Franco Zeffirelli’s production of Romeo and Juliet and other roles at the Old Vic
1961 joins Royal Shakespeare Company: 1962 Isabella in Measure for Measure, Titania in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (filmed 1965, on DVD), etc.

1963 Nottingham Playhouse Company: Lady Macbeth in Macbeth, Viola in Twelfth Night, and on tour in West Africa

1965 Nottingham Playhouse Company: Isabella in Measure for Measure

1969–71 Royal Shakespeare Company; roles include Hermione and Perdita in The Winter’s Tale, Viola in Twelfth Night (both 1969), Portia in The Merchant of Venice (1971)

1975–80 Royal Shakespeare Company: 1976, Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing, Lady Macbeth in Macbeth, Adriana in The Comedy of Errors (this and Macbeth also Thames Television, available on DVD); Regan in King Lear; 1979, Imogen in Cymbeline

1987 National Theatre Company, Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra, 1988, created Dame of the British Empire

1988 Mistress Quickly in Branagh’s film of Henry V; directed Much Ado About Nothing for the Renaissance Theatre Company

1989 National Theatre Company: Gertrude in Hamlet

1991 Chichester Festival Company: Volumnia in Coriolanus

2003 Countess in All’s Well That Ends Well, 2006, Mistress Quickly in The Merry Wives: the Musical, both Royal Shakespeare Company

2005 created Companion of Honour

2009 Titania in A Midsummer Night’s Dream Rose Theatre, Kingston-upon-Thames

Bibliography


About The Author

Stanley Wells, Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Honorary Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute, is General Editor of the Oxford and Penguin editions of
Shakespeare. He is Honorary Governor Emeritus of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and was for many years Vice-Chairman of the Board. His books include *Shakespeare: For All Time* (Macmillan, 2002), *Shakespeare & Co.* (Penguin, 2006), and *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (2010). His writings on theatre include *Royal Shakespeare* (listed above), *Shakespeare on Stage: An Anthology of Criticism* (Oxford, 1997), review articles in *Shakespeare Survey*, and numerous reviews of individual productions in e.g. the TLS and elsewhere.