

# I've only flown first class once and I wish I hadn't

## Carol Midgley



I have only once flown posh class on an aeroplane. It was a free upgrade (no idea why; I was wearing jeans) and it delivered all the luxury-porn of which I'd heard: beds, free champagne, in-toilet tulips, crew so eager to please that you sensed the free massage might have come with "added extras" if you'd only asked nicely. And, of course, it ruined all future air travel for me. Returning to economy after upper class is like straddling a scabby mule after riding Red Rum. I'd never pay for it, as you're basically handing over a grand for a decent kip and a bowl of warm nuts. But the merest taste of it sows a seed of discontent that never leaves you. The cattle-class traveller, however, now faces a tricky dilemma.

Virgin Atlantic, EI and Air New Zealand are among major airlines offering economy passengers the option of blind bidding for an upgrade to unsold business class seats. Once you've bought your pleb ticket you can enter an online auction for a seat in the Nirvana beyond the swishy curtain. They refuse to reveal the average winning bid, but it's thought that £550 might succeed in bumping you up to "premium economy" on a Heathrow to Auckland flight.

I don't know whether you'd consider it worth handing over a typical monthly mortgage payment to recline and finger a cloth napkin, but I do reckon this. This auction caper is going

**(I couldn't sleep) and some scrote had obviously stolen the bag then dumped it, irritated that nurses don't carry a menu of Class A drugs in handy score-size packs. To me, however, it was a bag of wonders: sterile wipes, a blood pressure meter, bandages, sharps box,**

**thermometer, what looked like a diabetes testing kit. I found the nurse's number inside and was able to return everything to her. But it's surely a sign of a) old fogeyness and b) impending hypochondria that I secretly wanted to keep almost all of it.**



PETER DAZELEY / GETTY IMAGES

to put the dampeners on a lot of trips. Imagine tendering a fair sum and getting excited as you picture your gourmet lunch and at-seat pedicure. But then you find you were outbid by a tanner by Rick from Godalming and are in fact plonked back in cramped row 72, opposite the stinky lav where you must eat a meal that smells like dog food with a plastic fork, before leaving the aircraft bent at right-angles. I think we can log that under "severe anti-climax". What if you decide not to bid but then kick yourself when you're wedged between two people with chronic flatulence in economy? I can't see the frequent business class passenger being wild about this either. They pay full whack to avoid ruffraff like me, so they're not going to want upstarts crashing the party via an airline form of eBay. Air travel is, alas, a cigar-shaped model of the UK class system. If you're sitting pretty in the land of plenty, you don't want to look at the squalor behind you, and interlopers are unlikely to be welcomed.

And yet, if it spells the end of the free upgrade then it's not all bad. Few spectacles are more pitiful than people prostituting themselves at check-in in the hope of bagging a ticket to turn left. The staff know all the tricks: flirting, pretending to be on honeymoon, dressing in their best bib and tucker. Save your breath. It hardly ever works; you just look a prat and spend an eight-hour flight in economy wearing a three-piece suit. It's just a flight, after all. Everyone arrives at the same time. And wherever you're seated in the pecking order, at least if catastrophe strikes and the aircraft is plunging into the sea, you know it's a rare occasion when you truly are all in this together.

## The Quiet Man shows some balls

**What about IDS, eh? Thanks to my colleague Rachel Sylvester we now know that while pushing his welfare reforms through Iain Duncan Smith became so angry at what he saw as Treasury delaying tactics he grabbed a phone from one of his staff and told the testy Treasury mandarin on the other end: "If you ever speak to my officials like that again I'll bite your balls off and send them to you in a box." Well! Who knew the Cabinet had its very own Luis Suárez? It's a better class of threat than "Do you like hospital food?" but what box did he have in mind, I wonder. His red one? A duck-egg blue Tiffany job? Would the scrotumless civil servant qualify for disability benefit? So many questions. Still, while I don't condone mutilating genitals I have to admire a boss so determined he'd threaten to chew someone's nads off. Never underestimate the teeth of a Quiet Man.**



# My one regret



**At 76, Vanessa Redgrave is as feisty as ever, but her daughter Natasha's death still haunts her, she tells Tim Teeman**

**W**ow — great legs," the lady next to me sighs when Vanessa Redgrave's bathrobe falls open in Jesse Eisenberg's Off Broadway play *The Revisionist*. It is a fleeting moment of joy in a fraught 90 minutes of secrets and lies in which Redgrave, 76, plays Maria, the Polish cousin of brattish David (played by Eisenberg, the star of *The Social Network*), who is visiting from the US to finish a book in peace.

A few days later, in the green room of the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, Redgrave seems frail and cagey. She is wearing a loose, off-white shirt and trousers, her grey-white hair pinned back. She doesn't look at me but fiddles with the mineral water bottle she is holding, sounding distracted, angry and sad. Sentences drift and collapse, animosity flares. Redgrave and bolshiness are synonymous: she is as much famed for causes (whether Palestine or more recently the Dale Farm travellers) as her acting, though she is the only British actress to have won top honours at the Oscars, Emmys, Tonys, Golden Globes, Screen Actors Guild and Cannes.

*The Revisionist's* themes of loneliness and ageing echo a TV drama Redgrave is in called *The Call Out*, written and directed by her son Carlo Nero, about a policeman investigating a prowler inside an apartment building: Redgrave plays an elderly woman living alone. Does she feel she is ageing as painfully as her characters? "No, acting is about getting beneath the skin of another character. I feel fine, what else would I feel?" she says. "It would be foolish to say I don't like being 76, wouldn't it?"

The pieces aren't about ageing, she says, but "how they are being treated, the forces that have shaped them. Maria cannot share her experiences with anyone: those people are the loneliest of all."

I ask if she feels this way herself. "No, I don't. I have no reason to feel lonely. I've got a wonderful extended family." In 2009 and 2010 she endured the deaths of her daughter, Natasha

Richardson, in a skiing accident, her brother Corin, from prostate cancer, and her sister Lynn, from breast cancer. Vanessa is now the only surviving child of the actors Michael Redgrave and Rachel Kempson. Natasha was married to Liam Neeson; her other daughter is the actress Joely Richardson.

"I miss my sister very much," Redgrave says. "She and I were very close. We were more or less the same age, had been through this and that. I always adored her." Vanessa "sprang" to Lynn's side when she discovered she had breast cancer. "Being with her through that made her life so precious to me. Having lost Lynn, losing Tash and Corin, makes you appreciate the lives of others much more precious, because you never expect them to die. Nobody expects it, even if things don't look good."

Does Redgrave think about her mortality? "That's why I don't like interviews. I have to answer questions instead of ask them." She picks at her water bottle. Eventually she answers: "Now and then of course I do think: 'I'm going to die.' It will probably take me by surprise. I'm lucky to have a lot of family that I adore who adore me."

When she says she "can't think" why Eisenberg thought she could play Maria, I ask if she means that she doubts her talent. "No, I have no doubt. I've got a lot to look after; I have to work hard not to betray that gift."

She does not seem in a hurry to retire. In 2011 she played Coriolanus's mother Volumnia in Ralph Fiennes's bloody, modern-day film version. Last year she was guest director at the Brighton Festival. Two months ago she starred opposite Terence Stamp in the tear-jerking British film, *Song for Marion*. She is looking forward to reuniting with James Earl Jones — with whom she appeared on Broadway and in the West End in *Driving Miss Daisy* — in September for Mark Rylance's production of *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Old Vic. Shakespeare's characters Beatrice and Benedick are past the bloom of youth, but this may be the first time a septuagenarian and an octogenarian have sparred in the roles.

Her career began in 1958 and her first major role was Shakespearean,

# is leaving my children to work



BELOW, NEALE HAYNES / CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; LEFT, JOHN CLARK / GETTY IMAGES

playing Rosalind in an RSC production of *As You Like It* in 1961. She won a Tony in 2003 for her part in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. She has appeared in movies as diverse as Ken Russell's *The Devils* (as a sexually repressed, humpbacked nun), *Julia* (for which she won an Oscar), *Mission: Impossible* (as an arms dealer) and the 1997 adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway*. At the same time her political activism forged a dual public identity. She was a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party and at the 1978 Oscars she decried "Zionist hoodlums whose behaviour is an insult to the stature of Jews all over the world".

If Dame Maggie and Dame Judi are adored, Redgrave, who was appointed CBE in 1967, is respected though not

(yet) cherished as warmly. She reportedly declined a damehood in 1999. In 2010, she was awarded a Bafta Fellowship. Even so, Redgrave will never be a cuddly national treasure.

She doesn't regret denouncing those "Zionist hoodlums". "The only regret I have is that I left my children for long periods. I wasn't available to them. I felt I had to dedicate myself to making a better world for them. What I couldn't see was making a better world for children meant not paying attention to my own children."

She almost became stepmother to Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, when she came close to marrying his father Gavin in 1960. How does that feel? "What do you mean?" she snaps. "He's not a boy of 5 now."

What was he like at 5? "Sweet. But there are more astonishing things than bathing a boy of 5 who went on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. Good luck to him."

She married her second husband, the actor Franco Nero, just over six years ago, but it was not legally binding. "Our kind of marriage ceremony wasn't the kind people consider to be normal, which I consider to be abnormal. It was a personal pledge, which was lovely. We have no other commitment to each other. We know that we love each other and that's not going to change."

Redgrave was reported to be a Liberal Democrat: is she still one? "No, I am definitely not," she says angrily. "I think it's disgusting, the spending cuts that have devastated life in England." Will

she vote for them again? "No." She'll switch to Labour? "That's my business." Suddenly her focus turns to the Leveson inquiry. She believes strongly in statutory press regulation and asks what I think, "as a guy from the press". I say many journalists are suspicious of statutory regulation. She snorts. "Why should the press be different to other citizens? If you've been hurt by the press, and a lot of people have, myself included... it's not hurt, it's actual damage." She tells me that I have "wasted time". And with that the interview is over.

The next day, I receive a text message from her: "I'm sorry, this week was anniversary of our Natasha, have been v low. If u want some more time, text me..." Three days later we're back in the green room and a transformed, apologetic Redgrave is smiling and generous with eye contact and hugs. "It was a very tough week," she says. "The fact is you can't cope with loss. You can cope doing certain things you have to carry on doing, which are priorities — grandchildren, children, work and so on. But you simply can't accept that someone you love and have loved for a long, long time is gone."

She has certain rituals, such as lighting candles, and feels Natasha's

## You feel and love as you do. Every part of sexuality is normal

presence when she's with her grandchildren. "You have a will to live, even if at the same time it seems very attractive just to give up. You have a special role as a grandparent."

Redgrave's anger with the press is down to the *Daily Mail* carrying excerpts of Tim Adler's racy family biography, *The House of Redgrave*. The paper later apologised for alleging "that she had once found her first husband (the director Tony Richardson) in bed with her father. We accept that this incident did not take place."

Redgrave called off planned legal action and claims that Adler's material is "completely untrue". How did she cope, though, with Richardson's bisexuality? "It wasn't difficult," she says. "I was brought up in a very different way than most newspaper owners. I never considered it to be wrong. You feel as you do, love as you do. Every part of sexuality is normal."

They divorced in 1967, but Redgrave and Richardson stayed friends. "That was the gift that came from how I was brought up, and Tony was a huge influence." He died of Aids in 1991.

Did she grow up knowing that her father, too, was bisexual? "Yes, I never thought about it much. Thank God the poisonous homophobes never got through." And her mother was also relaxed about it? "My mum came from a different generation that was very loyal. It doesn't mean people didn't have bursts of tears here and there. When you love you get jealous, but that's life."

**The Call Out is on Sky Arts 1 tonight (9pm)**

**Facing page: flanked by Natasha and Joely, Vanessa Redgrave holds newborn Carlo at their home in West London in 1969**