arts

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'I have enormous sadness in me'

Outwardly cheerful, inwardly conflicted, Fiona Shaw's life goes into her acting, *Tim Teeman* finds

Fiona Shaw is sorry she's late: she's been waiting for a builder to fix the roof at her home in Primrose Hill, North London. Her mother's also got plumbing problems at Shaw family HQ in Cork. "It's already the dampest house in Southern Ireland," Shaw says, laughing. "She said it was so cold she couldn't hold a book in bed."

Shaw is speaking at an accelerated, excitable gabble. Sounds dicey, her mother is 83, after all. "Oh, she doesn't embrace suffering," says Shaw. "She's just bought a sports car. Horrible green thing. But she's always 'going', as my granny used to say. Always on her way somewhere. Never still. When I was growing up, if she wasn't at home she was at a party."

Like mother, like daughter . . . Shaw also takes life at a gallop. The acclaimed actress is just finishing her stint as Mother Courage at the National Theatre, directed by her old mate and collaborator Deborah Warner, for whom she also played Electra, Hedda Gabler, Richard II and Medea. She is rehearsing her one-woman rendition of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, which she first performed 13 years ago and which she will do at Wilton's Music Hall in East London, also directed by Warner. After that there's a big play, *London Assurance*, at the National opposite Simon Russell Beale, then Shaw will direct her second opera for English National Opera after *Riders to the Sea* last year. Oh, and there are the last Harry Potters to film. It's a breathless schedule and she barely draws breath relating it, or much else, during our lunch. Thoughts and words flit, germinate, scatter.

"When I first did *The Waste Land* we thought about me lying down in a stairwell, the audience looking down. But we finally did it in an old disco in Brussels, with light bulbs that cast big shadows. We also performed it in an old munitions factory in Dublin. We performed it at Wilton's too: Deborah likes finding unusual spaces. But you can't have more than 200 people or it becomes a different kind of theatrical event. The coughing starts up. It takes me 38 minutes, beginning to end. When I'm doing it, it feels like a movie running in my head and I'm watching it." She imagines scenes cinematically: when she talks about a dressing table, it's her mother's that she sees in her mind.

Shaw says she remembers most of the poem. "Slowly, doing it a lot, made me believe the heart of the poem was the heart of Eliot and I came to like it, and him, more and more. A very gentle person comes across, which his letters bear out. You can feel his desperation when he wrote [recuperating from a nervous breakdown in 1921] 'On Margate Sands./I can connect/Nothing with nothing./The broken fingernails of dirty hands./My people humble people who expect/Nothing.' I always felt it was the heart of the poem and the letters show that too. The big difference is imagining the crowd on London Bridge. Now, post 9/11, a crowd means something else, buildings have changed, Eliot's image of postwar London has changed."

She shivers. "The other big thing to have changed is me. 'Your shadow at morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at the evening rising to meet you./I will show you fear in a handful of dust.' That 'shadow of morning striding behind you' was behind me when I first performed this, at 35. Now 'the shadow at evening' is much bigger." Meaning she has a sense of her own mortality? "Absolutely. Ever since I turned 50 last year." That sounds scary. "Oh, I'm just enjoying everything much more," she says, back in hearty mode. "Living, taking pleasure in things. I'm loving work more than I have for years. I enjoy making films, but my heart is in the stage. Every night you have to be on. There's no second take."

DONALD COOPER

Last year Shaw's father had a stroke. "He's in a home. The day before he had a stroke he was up a ladder and I don't think he'll be going up ladders again. My mum visits him every day" — she smiles — "apart from her days off in France." She notes my stricken expression. "As a family we have rather a perfunctory attitude to illness. My father was an eye surgeon and my mother, by education, a physicist."

Fiona Shaw, *left*, near to home base on Primrose Hill; as Harry Potter's Aunt Petunia (with Harry Melling and Richard Griffiths), *above*; and as Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage at the National

The Shaw house was filled with music. "My mother adores singing and plays piano. My uncle was a phenomenal pianist. My brother John is a double bassist. I used to play the piano, badly, and cello. My brother Peter played violin."

It sounds idyllic, especially as the family home was grand, but it wasn't. "Like a lot of Irish households we read a lot of Irish history. It was almost Soviet, raising the next generation with a mythic view of their history." She was raised a Roman Catholic, "which I had zero interest in in the first place and it was enforced by people with zero education — not a great combination. At least we were privileged enough not to be caught in the Church's power structure. The Catholics believed only they were going to Heaven and I would ask my Dad, 'Do you really think that Muslims and Hindus aren't?' The Catholic Church told you what to think and what to feel."

Shaw was also "frightened" of her (half-English) father. "He was very, very strict," she says quietly. "We were terrified of him. He wasn't abusive, he is a very honourable man, intellectually curious. Knowledge, history and rugby were the three big themes in our house. But he was unbending. His big complaint was that I was either out or sick. My mother was a party girl, so they were very different people. His expectations of me were impossible. You were meant to study in very cold rooms and not go out. This was the Seventies and we were desperate to get out dancing to Abba. So I went out and got on with it."

Shaw's parents were dead set against her becoming an actor, but her father agreed that if she studied at university first (she did philosophy at Cork) he would pay for whatever she chose to do next — which meant Rada. "For the first time in my life, I worked very hard and went for it," she says.

By her mid-20s she was feeling fulfilled (at the RSC) and the family, generally, "was at its zenith, everyone doing brilliantly." Then Shaw's brother Peter, 18, died in a car crash. "He was going to a rugby match with friends. My mother remembers giving him the keys and thinking, 'Things are going so well for us'. So odd she thought that at that moment. But then I know, really *know*, that I am going to die in February." Really? What day? "On a Thursday." My eyebrows go skyward. "When Peter died, it stopped me. I was just having my debut at the RSC, playing Celia in *As You Like It*. It was devastating. I go back on Christmas Day every year to his grave and every year I have the same conversation with my older brother; we both worry that the heather planted on his grave won't grow. He's buried next to my granny and my grandfather and my great-uncle. The dead are part of your life."

Until her brother's death, Shaw had played comedy roles — "preposterous plots, castles, getting banished, but after Peter I played Electra. It felt right to act it. It wasn't like I was acting out my grief but I certainly felt it expunged. Up to that point acting had been a facility, after it, it became a reality. With a part like that you're communicating the private sorrows of an audience. I am very interested in playing a psychologist next, to be the recipient of someone else's stories rather than the teller."

What about Lady Macbeth: she hasn't done her yet? "I just might," she says quizzically. "Alan Rickman asked me recently, 'Whatever happened to us doing the Macbeths?'" What? Those two as Mr and Mrs M? Be still our beating . . .

As for the insane Harry Potter slipstream, she is almost dismissive. "Harry Melling, the young man who plays my son in *Mother Courage*, plays my son in Potter (they are Petunia and Dudley Dursley respectively), and we're the poor relations. We never do any magic, we have it done to us. The odd thing is leaving the set and to see 3,000 people march on: 1,000 children, 1,000 parents and 1,000 minders. Alan Rickman and Maggie Smith sit there for hours waiting for them to file in. Honestly, I get more recognised for *Three Men and a Little Lady* than Harry Potter."

Shaw is single, "very happily" (this after newspaper reports linking her with the actress Saffron Burrows; she won't confirm or deny this). She's not dating or particularly relationship-focused and talks about living in a "community of people" in Primrose Hill and feeling "safe and content". She has been friends with Warner ever since they got off to a bad start when Warner directed her in a play at the Edinburgh Festival in 1981. "When it was suggested we work together eight years later we both thought the other wouldn't really want to. She's amazing, a great inspiration and the first person I'd call if I needed to."

All through her thirties, Shaw says, she "suffered daily" as the time for having children came and receded. "I think I am very old-fashioned. I'd want to do it in as conventional a way as possible. A relationship is sent by God and accident." Now her maternal instincts are played out on her much-loved 9-nine-year-old nephew, Jim. "The kind of actress I wanted to be meant playing huge theatrical parts requiring huge amounts of travel and emotional energy. I couldn't have done that with or to a child."

> "There's no time to rest. I can hear the bell tolling, but it's not for me"

She won't discuss her sexuality in depth — partly with her mother in mind, partly "a residue from being Catholic" — and, although she claims newspapers have printed mistruths about her love life before, she doesn't feel moved to correct them. "What I appear to be is who I am. People buy a ticket, watch me on stage, then I go home and close the door. They don't need to know anything else. If you come with a projected image of someone you cannot see what, or who, they are playing."

This we disagree on: I say that when I see Ian McKellen on film or stage, I don't think of what he does in bed, I think of who he is playing: Shaw is being reductive in her view of an audience's sophistication.

Shaw likes to go home after the theatre "tired and spent" and hopes, when mortality does finally come knocking, she is "satisfyingly exhausted in the way George Bernard Shaw said we should feel on our deathbeds". She sometimes gets down. "I'm not a depressive by nature. But I have enormous sadness in me. I can see it in my face."

To really unwind she loves climbing, would love to do Kilimanjaro. Will I come? Why not? "There's no time to rest, Tim," she says, laughing. "We can rest for 12,000 years. I can hear the bell tolling, but it's not for me." And then, like her mother, she's off.

***The Waste Land* is at Wilton's Music Hall, London E1 (www.wiltons.org.uk, 020-7702 2789/ 020-7452 3000) Dec 30 to Jan 10**

The odd couple — and the other guy

***Rachel Campbell-Johnston* goes to a party thrown by three artists with little in common**

Visual Art

Sargent, Sickert, Spencer

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

★★★☆☆

A small exhibition called *Sargent, Sickert, Spencer* opened in Cambridge on Tuesday. It's the first of a series of shows that set out to illuminate the "hidden depths" of the Fitzwilliam Museum's fine collection. But why these three painters? What do they have in common? Or have they been assembled because their names have a nicely alliterative ring?

As a booklet accompanying the show makes clear, these artists, for all that they were working in Britain in the same era — the late 19th and early 20th centuries — had ideas, styles and visions as completely different as their backgrounds and temperaments were widely diverse.

Of course, such diversity can be illuminating. Take the first two artists: the peripatetic American John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) and the German-born Londoner Walter Sickert (1860-1942). The careers of these two great Edwardian rivals are often held up for comparison precisely because of their opposing attitudes.

Sargent, if he had not already existed, would have had to be invented by his friend Henry James. He was a suave flatterer who made his reputation as a society portraitist. His imposing full-length pictures, of dashing men flaunting riding crops as if about to thrash the servants while their languid wives draped themselves on sofas, graced every grand drawing-room of the era.

Sickert, by contrast, was a prickly character who immersed himself in the crude realities of common life. Flying in the face of Edwardian decorum his sad, dark nudes speak of bleak encounters in gloomy back rooms with whores who observe our human foibles as coldly as the painter appears to do himself.

Sickert and Sargent can be presented as two sides of a coin. But how exactly does Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) fit in? He comes from another generation and this exhibition certainly does not make any strong argument for including him.

But then, perhaps that's not its point. Perhaps this new series of Fitzwilliam Museum exhibitions should have been titled "glancing angles" rather than "hidden depths" for, with such relatively limited material to draw on, curators cannot hope to expound upon any subject profoundly. The most they can do is cast a flashlight across a surface, highlighting facets, glimpsing new fascinations, finding fresh points of interest and suggesting also, perhaps, alternative angles of approach.

This show cannot present any of Sargent's grand drawing-room dramas because the Fitzwilliam doesn't have any in its collection. And of all Sickert's famously macabre Camden Town nudes the museum's *Mornington Crescent Nude (detail pictured)* is probably the only one in which the girl is presented as beautiful. She sinks into her mattress with its crumpled sheets, her pale flesh picked out by pointilliste touches of almost diaphanous light.

So where does this leave the spectator? The answer, perhaps, is with the sort of wandering, semi-distracted glances that might not have occurred had some main argument been more forcefully driven. Sargent's portrait of a Sicilian peasant, a dashing study in which even a heavily moustachioed working man is made to look noble, demonstrates the inimitable flattery of his touch. But it also provides an amusing comparison with a portrait of Sickert in which a friend, sketching the painter's fearsome facial hair, captures his rebellious character.

Meanwhile, the *Mornington Crescent Nude* is hung close to Spencer's famous *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece*, in which the artist paints himself, gauche and bespectacled with a shaggy haircut, in front of the naked Preece, who stares into space, eyes glazed over, expression resigned and cold. How similar her mood of detachment is to that of Sickert's post-coital prostitutes.

This is the sort of over-the-shoulder glance that is rife in a show that feels a bit like a slightly overcrowded cocktail party hosted by three people who don't count each other as particular friends. On the whole the room is divided into discrete groups. But a handful of crossover acquaintanceships bridge the divide. Here are Sargent and Spencer sharing reminiscences of war, for example, or Sickert and Sargent painting Venetian scenes. And there is a portrait of William Rothenstein, who was to be friends with all three.

You can work the room, try to knit a story together, feel a bit frustrated when it doesn't seem to quite fit. Or you can take the opportunity to further a few old friendships; discover something more about Sargent as a fluid landscape watercolourist, renew your appreciation of Sickert's wonderful music-hall canvases. And, as in all good social gatherings, you might make some new acquaintances.

***Sargent, Sickert, Spencer* is at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (01223 332900; www.fitzwilliam.cam.ac.uk), to April 5**