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JOELY  
RICHARDSON

# ST ONE MORE GENERATION'

Joely Richardson is following both her mother and her sister by appearing in an Ibsen play about love and death. She talks movingly about the loss of Natasha, the sister she adored, and the future of her family dynasty. By Caroline Scott. Photograph: Harry Borden

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Joely Richardson didn't really want to talk to me. "Can't you send a man?" she had asked through her agent, hoping a male interviewer might focus more on the work and less on the sadness of the past two-and-a-half years. First, Joely's older sister, Natasha, died after a skiing accident in 2009. Then, last year, Corin and Lynn Redgrave, brother and sister of her mother, Vanessa Redgrave, died within weeks of each other.

When we finally meet, she is as jittery as a whippet, but delightful. During the three-hour photo shoot she asks for nothing but an espresso (which she doesn't drink). And at our interview the following day, she's alone, no publicist, no entourage. She is pale, fragile, thin as pole and luminously beautiful; she wears standard-issue American teeth but she doesn't have that plumped up, buffeted sheen of most Hollywood stars — her face moves.

Clearly, work has been her salvation. Over the past year she has made three films: in *Anonymous*, the Shakespeare-identity thriller, she and Vanessa played Queen Elizabeth 40 years apart. She appears in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* opposite Daniel Craig and *Red Lights* with Robert De Niro, and she's currently filming *Thanks for Sharing* with Tim Robbins. But it's her forthcoming theatre role in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* that is giving her sleepless nights.

It's a story of romantic strife set in a small Norwegian town. Joely will play Elida, a role that both her mother and sister played before her (Vanessa in 1978 at Manchester Royal Exchange; Natasha at London's Almeida in 2003). Joely's run ends the day before the third anniversary of Natasha's death. "Maybe a shrink would say I'm doing this for Tash, there is a very direct influence. But really, I'm doing it for myself."

She is palpably, disconcertingly nervous. Her hands flutter up to her face like birds coming down to rest in her lap before flying up again. "I was saying to Mum this morning, it's probably completely insane of me to have taken this on, but it's too late now. She reminded me I felt like this before I began rehearsing *Side Effects* [she played a bipolar politician's wife in Michael Weller's portrait of an imploding marriage, which ran off-Broadway earlier this year]. I remember thinking: 'God. Is it morally right to accept a job you have no idea you can do?' I just didn't know if my brain, at 46, could take in 80 pages of dialogue. I believed there was a big chance I'd let everyone down..."

I don't think she's being disingenuous. Does she feel like that before every job? "No I don't. I hadn't done a play for nine years and a lot has happened in that time." *Side Effects* came at a point in her life that she describes as "a blasted landscape". "Everything in our family had smashed to the ground and, for a little bit, the pieces just lay there, broken." She still struggles to find the words that feel comfortable. "Sometimes I talk about her 'leaving us' I understand why Americans say 'passing' because it avoids, you know, um..."

She looks fraught. "I'm tempted to say her death was life-changing, that's such a weird juxtaposition, but in every sense it was. I hadn't known a day without her, but at the same time I was unaware of how much she

was my touchstone until she wasn't there. All the dreams you have, the common language, the shared history... Everything was levelled when she left us. Then, just as we were getting over the shock, Corin died, then Lynn. We were just reeling."

At the same time, Daisy, her daughter with her ex-husband, the producer Tim Bevan, left home to study in New York. "That was another kind of grief. I don't even have words to describe it. It was loss, off the board. I felt

as though everything I'd known had been razed to the ground."

For a long time, Joely seemed to do work that was easy. Joely had spent the six years before Natasha died making *Nip/Tuck*, the gruesomely addictive cult American TV series set in a plastic-surgery practice. By the time she left in 20XX, the storylines had become positively Greek. Her character, the wife of a top surgeon, became pregnant with a congenitally disfigured baby, had a lesbian affair

and tried to murder her monstrous mother, played by Vanessa, who had slept with her lover. Even Joely looks baffled. "There was quite a bit of improvising," she says with some understatement. "To be honest, a lot of it is a blank. I was doing my job — I wasn't creatively, ah... Somewhere along the way, I disconnected. You're on a treadmill, and suddenly you think: 'What am I doing here..?'"

She left *Nip/Tuck* to care for Daisy, who was undergoing medical treatment for a longstanding vascular problem. But she



Vanessa Redgrave with her two daughters, Natasha (20 months, left) and baby Joely

THESE PAGES: TOP: GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: FROM LEFT: TOPHAM/PICTUREPOINT; GETTY; FOTOS INTERNATIONAL/REX; GETTY; GETTY; GETTY; WENN

## THE REDGRAVES: A DECLINING DYNASTY



**SIR MICHAEL REDGRAVE**  
The actor and father of the dynasty died in 1985. A memoir by his son later revealed he was bisexual



**RACHEL KEMPSON**  
The actress was married to Michael for 50 years. She died four days before her 93rd birthday in 2003



**TONY RICHARDSON**  
The film director married Vanessa in 1962 and fathered her two daughters. He died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991



**VANESSA REDGRAVE**  
Michael's eldest daughter and mother to Joely and Natasha. The Oscar-winning actress is famed for her activism



**CORIN REDGRAVE**  
The only son of Michael and Rachel and brother to Vanessa and Lynn. The actor and Marxist activist died in 2010



**LYNN REDGRAVE**  
The youngest of Michael's three children, the Oscar-nominated actress lost her battle with breast cancer in 2010



**JEMMA REDGRAVE**  
The daughter of Corin, the Lamda-trained actress and mother of two has starred in a series of high-profile television dramas



**NATASHA RICHARDSON**  
The Tony-award-winning actress and wife of Liam Neeson died after suffering head injuries in a skiing accident in 2009

never felt she belonged in L.A. "I did the work and came home. It wasn't my world."

In her teens she went to an Ivy League school in California, "but it was up in the mountains, hardly Beverly Hills 90210. I was always the outsider. But then because I've moved in so many different circles, I've felt perpetually the outsider."

Joely spent her early childhood in London where she attended St Paul's Girl's School. Then, at 14, spent two years at a tennis academy in Florida before her dad, the director Tony Richardson, insisted she move to a more academic school. Tony, who died from an Aids-related illness in 1991, was a big influence. "I remember him saying it was so important to remain teachable and take direction. As an actress you're there to facilitate someone else's vision. I do hold on to that."

It's standard to portray Vanessa as dotty, the lunatic Trot who left her children to fend for themselves while she made a film about Palestinian liberation. The truth isn't quite as one-dimensional. Vanessa, raised by hands-off parents herself (the actors Rachel Kempson and Sir Michael Redgrave) genuinely seemed not to grasp how much her children needed her. In her autobiography she described explaining to Natasha, then six, that mummy was making the world a better place for her and the children she would have.

"But I won't need you so much then, I need you now," said Natasha. In a harrowing open letter to her in 2007, Vanessa formally apologised for getting it wrong.

"Hmm. I don't know about that letter," sniffs Joely, "I'll ask Mum — it just sounds so unlikely... It wasn't Mum's language and she would never have called Tash Natasha." It turns out the "letter" was cobbled together from other interviews.

The politics, though, are on record.

Vanessa and Corin were members of the Workers' Revolutionary Party; she has variously stood bail for Guantanamo inmates and expressed support for Chechen separatists, the IRA and the PLO; she famously horrified half of Hollywood by referencing



With mum Vanessa (centre) and sister Natasha (left) in 2000. Below: with Vanessa in *Lady Windemere's Fan*, 2002

you're young, you know there's so much ahead. There's regeneration. If you lose people in middle age, all you see is endings." The conversation with Natasha carries on. "Tash knew exactly where she was going. She was very focused, very organised. I've become more organised. The conversation continues with my father too. I heard his voice booming out of an old cassette tape the other day and it was comforting."

Her cab, which she keeps sending away, is back for the fourth time. But she wants to keep talking, so she sends it away again. I wonder if she is lonely. "I am sometimes, especially travelling for work. That's when I feel sorry for myself." What about love? "You know I don't talk about this!" She had a fling with Robbie Williams after her marriage split, dated Jamie Theakston and, more recently, the Russian

business tycoon and owner of the *Evening Standard*, Evgeny Lebedev, but they split up over the summer. "I've been so busy there's been nothing else outside work."

So to the play. To me, the play's theme is loss. Joely points out that, at the end, the gain is greater than the loss. We talk about Lynn Redgrave, and Joely recalls a line

from the film *Evening*, which Natasha and Vanessa appeared in: "I always thought there'd be more time." Weak as she was — she died weeks later — Lynn spoke at her brother's funeral. "Lynn was so warm and funny. She raised her hands and said, without self pity: 'Yup, this is how it is.'"

Would she like Daisy to act? 'I want her to do what she wants to do,' she shrugs. Really? "Well, lately I've said — and it's a joke laced with truth — 'Come on, let's just take it one more generation...' which is horrible of me! But there is a small voice inside me, saying, 'Let it not die out here.'"

Joely Richardson stars in *The Lady from the Sea* at *The Rose Theatre, Kingston, Surrey*, from February 23 to March 17, 2012. Tel: 08444 821 556; visit [www.rosetheatrekingston.org](http://www.rosetheatrekingston.org)

"Zionist hoodlums" in her Best Supporting Actress speech at the 1978 Oscars.

Joely sighs. "Mum knows I don't share her politics." She describes herself as "passive-political". "I keep thinking: would people love her more if she was the kind of actress who sat by the pool and drank Champagne? I disagree with the way she's gone about things, but I also know that everything she's done has been out of care for others... Yes, home was chaotic.

## 'HOME WAS CHAOTIC. WE DID CARE FOR OURSELVES. BUT IT WAS LIFETIMES AGO'

And yes, we did look after ourselves. Tash and me and our brother, Carlo (Vanessa's son with the director Franco Nero), had a rota on the fridge for shopping and cooking and cleaning. We were a very self-contained unit. But," she frowns with irritation. "It was four or five lifetimes ago."

Joely and Natasha, two years her senior, created very different family lives for themselves. Joely has a bolt hole in the country. "My escape is decorating and growing vegetables." And Natasha was happiest in her "nest" in upstate New York where she lived with Liam Neeson and their sons Micheál, now 16 and Daniel, 15.

She has read acres of grief lit. "And do you know what? It helps." She has also had counselling. "If you lose people when

