Dame Janet Suzman | Encounters in the World of Theatre and Film

– Dr. Trudy Gold: First of all, thank you so much for agreeing to do this.

– Dame Janet Suzman: Don't thank me before.

– Trudy: I'm English, I can't help it. Anyway, you've had an extraordinary career, and you very kindly said that you'd give us a glimpse into it. Obviously, you were born in South Africa, you came to England when you were 20 on your own and you enrolled at LAMDA. Now, my first question, how important was acting to you as a kid? Was it always something you wanted to do, the theatre?

– Suzman: No, I lived in a desert. Johannesburg was a, some people might shout at me for this, was a bit of a theatrical desert.

– Trudy: Right.

– Suzman: 6,000 miles away from everywhere. Yeah, I remember that travelling grandese came, Margot Fonteyn and Beniamino Gigli. Never taken to the theatre. And it was musicals, "Oklahoma",(indistinct), I did fall in love with those. I know every single word. If anybody wants to catch me out on a lyric, I'm game. I was taken 10 times to get Will Durant's signature at the stage door. I was 10. So did that implant anything theatrical in me? I don't know. I was just a pain in the ass while I sang those songs.

– Trudy: So what happened then? What made you...

– Suzman: I don't know. I kind of... I'm trying to be serious about something that is so long ago I can barely remember it. I fell in love with language. Let me go back on a little... You're asking me for a voyage of memory now, which is...

– Trudy: Exactly. I love the way you put that.

– Suzman: Well, at school, and this is where it all begins, and I'm sure everybody will agree with me, if you had that teacher, you were lucky. That teacher who opened magic casements on perilous seas in fairylands forlorn. That's the one who opens young minds. Now I had, I was at a school called Kingsmead. All other girls in my family were sent to this very Anglican school run by a wonderful woman called D.V. Thompson, who strode about in her academic gown and would tolerate no racism, or nastiness of any kind in her school. It was a very, very nicely put together school. Anyway, I had this teacher. One was called Miss Cumberland. I'm trying to remember her first name because it was so divine. And the second one was called Angela. And she was straight out of Girton. I knew it. She was six foot tall and she taught us "As

You Like It". And clearly she'd been dreaming of doing Rosalind all her life. Something went into this dim brain of mine about imagery and human beings cavorting in forests and wonderful images that just perked me up, I suppose. I suppose you can say I sort of fell in love with Shakespeare.

– Trudy: So you fell in love with Shakespeare when you were at school?

– Suzman: And it wasn't an easy thing to define now, but clearly that has stayed with me all my life. I'm a stickler for the writer. I'm always on the side of the writer. Not the performer necessarily, although they're always good guys, but the writer. So having done that, and then the thought of when I left Wits, and Wits was very formative in my life because that was the year they brought in what was called the Academic Apartheid Bill. The Separate University Education Act, which was it's euphemistic name. There's lots of people out there in your audience who will remember these horrible times. Police on the campus, lots of beaten heads, friends disappearing, very left wing student body. I don't remember going to many lectures 'cause we all boycotted them a lot of the time. We were on that dry lawn outside the library protesting a lot. Anyway, it was a very active time. Very formative in my whole life really, this political aspect, I have to say. And Shakespeare is nothing if not political, certainly in history plays. But I don't want to make that the nub of it all. I think it's such a rich repository, acting. I certainly didn't want to act to be famous. I wanted to act to explore great plays. Back then, you know, we... Well, I can only speak for myself. If you went into the drama, somehow you wanted to mature yourself as an actor. And when Peter Hall arrived, I'm jumping the gun a little bit. I'm not going to be that neat, I hope you don't mind.

– Trudy: You don't have to be. But I do want to know about how you got into the world of Shakespeare. Because you were there at the beginning.

– Suzman: Well, some friends of mine, yes, some friends of mine, a very particular friend had gone to LAMDA. And she wrote to me and she said, "This is great. You should try it." Well, I was so unaware of myself and so, I think, arrogant. I didn't know what I was doing. So I auditioned when I came to London for all the drama schools I could find. That was Central School, RADA and LAMDA. And to my astonishment, I got into all of them. I think it was beginner's luck or just luck. And I chose LAMDA because it was run then by a marvellous lunatic called Michael McCuen, very eccentric, but very Shakespearian. By Shakespearian I mean somebody with a mind that could take in absolutely anything 'cause it's such a broad canvas with him, it's not narrow. And I went to LAMDA and I had three wonderful years there. And I knew on the first day, somehow rather, that this was a good choice. I don't know. It just felt nice, it felt good. I was happy to be there.

- Trudy: And then I know there was a bit of rep, but then you get into the Royal Shakespeare Company.

- Suzman: Well, it was a matinee, and somebody said, you know, the RSC was just being founded by Peter Hall. Before that it was the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. What Peter Hall wanted to do, I call them the Cambridge School. They moved in. They were heirs of F.R Leavis. Lady (indistinct), these are the people who changed the face of criticism, I think, in English literature. And Peter Hall and John Barton were responsible for wanting to form a company. England is a very idiosyncratic place. On the continent, there have been companies. The Comedie Francaise, the Swedish Company, the Brecht Company in Berlin, the Treato Nacional in Spain, everywhere where culture is respected. It's not respected in England, this is a surprising thing I'm going to say. The English are huge Philistines, but they muddle into genius. And somehow rather British theater's always been disorganised, off the cuff and sort of adventurous. And so it was very anti-company. Nobody wanted to sign up for three years. "Well, I might miss a film. I don't know. I can't sign up for three years," people would say. That's what you have to do. Anyway, that's what he, he wanted to form a company and recreate what Shakespeare already knew. 'Cause his was a company. He ran the Globe, an acting member of the Globe and he wrote plays. I think one all this has to remember that Shakespeare was not... He was not a literary figure, he was an actor. And that's how he's best approached and understood. Anyway, Peter Hall formed a company, and that's my training. I am basically very in love with company work because it brings out the best in great plays. Great plays are usually not just one person starring in the centre of it, and all the satellite parts, you know, rather...

- Trudy: It was a great time though in theatre, wasn't it? You had so many brilliant actors at that particular time as well.

- Suzman: Quite wonderful. But you see, we worked properly on the play. That was when Peter opened the season, the new season, the brand new season. It was the quinta centenary, the 400th anniversary. And he opened it with "The Wars of the Roses," three history plays. Actually, Shakespeare wrote three parts of "Henry VI," John Barton cut them brilliantly into two. And nobody could tell what was cut where. I remember once there was, I think, an observer competition to say who could tell which was Shakespeare's and which was John Barton's lines in the play. But anyway, he then expanded it to all the seven history plays from "Richard II" to "Richard III." That meant people could come to Stratford and see a different play every night, including matinee, seven different plays. So you went through Shakespeare's version of English history and it was really fun. There was a wonderful story on the first night. Stratford was en fete really because it was such a big deal. It was like going to a Chinese opera. People brought picnics, they got to know each other. It was an all day event. Curtain

went up at 10:00 AM, next curtain at 2:00 PM, next curtain at 7:30 PM. So you've got three huge plays in one day. And people loved that. They loved it. I remember when the President Kennedy died, we were doing "Richard III" that night, the last of the three. I had morning, afternoon, evening was "Richard III." And at 7:30, as the curtain was going up, Jeffrey Dench, Judy Dench's brother, had a radio backstage. And we'd learned that Jack Kennedy had been taken to the hospital and had died. And we were the only person who who knew it because the audience were already in their seats, the doors to the theatre were closed, and the front of house said... We said, "You can't take the curtain up, we've got to tell the audience." And they said, "We're not a news bulletin here. We're a theatre, we're taking the curtain up." So we played "Richard III," which is a huge play about the death of Kings, to an audience that didn't know, and then at the interval it all changed. Somehow the word got around that their world had changed with Jack Kennedy's death.

– Trudy: Terrible, terrible night.

– Suzman: But it was the best performance of that play. It sort of related globally.

– Trudy: Of course. And you played some extraordinary roles, didn't you? You played Ophelia, you played of course, Cleopatra, you played many of the great female roles, didn't you?

– Suzman: I've been very lucky with that. Yeah.

– Trudy: And a question for you, not just the incredible beauty of the language, but when you played a historic...

– Suzman: Let me just interrupt again for a single moment. Shakespeare's not about beauty, it's about meaning.

– Trudy: Meaning, yeah.

– Suzman: If it's beautiful it's because he's a great poet, but that's not what... They used to sing Shakespeare a long time ago because of its beauty. Henry Ainley, an old actor, used to sing, "Da, da, da, da da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da upon St. Crispin's Day." All going up in semi tones like a piece of music. That wouldn't happen now. And that's the riff that Olivier stole when he did his "Henry V" film which was raising his voice, "Upon St. Crispin's Day." I can't do it.

– Trudy: But when you...

– Suzman: I'm sorry for the interruption.

– Trudy: No, no. This is a masterclass, Janet, this is what you're

giving now. The next question would be then, when it was a historical role, did you soak yourself in it? You said to me once that you always want to honour the people you play.

– Suzman: Yeah, you do. Somehow. I know that Shakespeare did what he wanted with his real characters, all of them. But I'm simply an interpreter. So when I played, for instance, Shakespeare's Joan of Arc, Joan la Pucelle as she's called in "Henry VI." I didn't know who she was really. And then I read Shaw's play and then I started reading... There's a lot of material about Joan of Arc. Yeah. But what's interesting is Shakespeare was here, a protestant Englishman talking about little Catholic number. And his version of her is ratty and interesting because she's a horrible little liar. It's really interesting. Little tough little toughy thing. And that was my first part with them. So I did read an awful lot about Joan of Arc because I wanted to know more. I was curious myself. For instance, there was a moment in the Shaw play, then later I played the Shaw play on television. Shaw's Joan, which is quite a different character. She's the holy one who hears voices. There's a stage direct... I'm sorry to diverse, but I'll come back to this.

– Trudy: Because was that play for today? Which I wanted to come onto.

– Suzman: Okay. Yeah. Anyway, there's a stage direction in George Bernard Shaw's play of Joan Arc which says, "Joan makes her mark." And I thought to myself, "What Mark? what is the mark she makes?" The first thing you think is, "Oh, well she'd just do a cross. Isn't that what they... If you can't write, that's what you do. You make us of that cross thing." And then I thought, "No, no, no, no. She's angry. It's another sort of mark. I wonder what... I know. A circle." Turns out in the archives in Paris, that's the mark she made.

– Trudy: That's interesting.

– Suzman: Isn't it interesting? And that's just an actor's instinct going towards an angry girl. You know, if you go to tonk, tonk, you have to be rather delicate and pick up the pen. But with a circle, you just kind of grind it into the paper. And that was nice. So sometimes you can find little pathways to the character.

– Trudy: So you've got this incredible company. It's the golden age of British theatre. It's fascinating you say the British are a nation of Philistines, but somehow it muddles through. But it's also great drama on television, isn't it?

– Suzman: Well, they did that then, they don't do it now.

– Trudy: I know. And that's interesting, because there was a period when they had some serious plays.

- Suzman: Well, it was called "Play for Today."

- Trudy: Yes, exactly.

- Suzman: "Ah, you can see my Hedda Gabler on 'Play for Today.'"

- Trudy: I'm going to ask you the big question. We can be grumpy about this. What's gone wrong? Because you don't... Before we get on to Hollywood and what happened there. And what do you think has gone wrong? I mean, one of my issues with Shakespeare is how badly talked he is at schools, in universities. A whole generation of kids are turned off and they should be turned on. You had a brilliant teacher.

- Suzman: No, but Trudy, I think what I said before was, he shouldn't be treated as a literary figure. He should be treated as an actor. And therefore, the person teaching Shakespeare in a class, an English class of 12 year olds, 13 year old, whoever, shouldn't have them reading the text at their desks and sitting down quietly like mice, he should get them to stand up and speak the characters, stand up and... The moment you stand up, everything makes sense. I dare everybody around the world in your audience, if you don't understand something with Shakespeare, stand up and pretend you are that character, and you'll find something happens.

- Trudy: You would've made a great teacher. I'm being quite serious. The charisma. No, that's the problem. You talked about a teacher who set you alight. That's interesting.

- Suzman: Because she want to act it herself, so she did. She pranced about the classroom being Rosalind. I thought that was pretty good. But I think... I think most teachers maybe are scared of being a character or pulling out what is dramatic in the characters. They want to impress upon their pupils what amazing conceits, and metaphors, and imagery is in Shakespeare, which is quite right. But you can discover that standing up just as better than you can sitting down. But I think what's happened with all complex things now is both grievous and unstoppable. Because I think the simplification of things has taken a hold of. Doesn't mean they're less clever, it means they go about things a different way. People don't delve vertically into things, they skate horizontally on top of them. Ideas are mostly horizontal, or linear. And that makes it all too simplistic to be really, really interesting. I mean, I don't know what a great play is. I don't know. But it gives you a feeling that there's more to know, there's more to understand, there's something just out of your reach, there's a world elsewhere. Great writing does that. I don't believe tweets do that, do they?

- Trudy: That's your tweet.

- Suzman: Well, tweets can do that. Oh, sorry. I'll just throw this

phone away.

– Trudy: So you've got this great career at the Shakespeare company, you're playing on television, then it's Hollywood. Tell us about "Nicholas and Alexandra" because it was... Look, we've just completed a whole series on Russia, and of course, what we were looking at was the real Alexandra, and there you are, along with some brilliant other English actors–

– Suzman: Wonderful actors.

– Trudy: Produced by Sam Spiegel, who of course was one of the great, I don't know what you want to say about him. But how did you folk... I'm absolutely curious. How did you find that transition to the huge epic? I mean it's a beautiful performance, if I may say, you were absolutely brilliant.

– Suzman: Well, I didn't think you'd ask that transition to a huge epic. You know, when you make a film, you make it in bits. It's only on a stage that you get a feeling of an arc, because you're carrying that arc through for the whole evening, for three hours. When you film, you get called that morning and maybe you'll do one scene, and then maybe that afternoon you'll do another. Or they do a whole lot of a series which are in the same location together because of costs. It's a very different thing. So I must say, when I was called to Sam, we were in Los Angeles, the RSC, we were playing. It was "The Shrew" and "Much Ado," I think. I was Kate in "The Shrew" and Beatrice in "Much Ado." And I got a call that a car would arrive for me on Sunday morning, because a certain Sam Spiegel wanted to see me at Columbia Studio. Woo. Show. Okay. I thought that's lovely. So this gigantic limousine arrived. But I just have to tell you the story. When I met him, I was taken up some stairs. There was a huge office. And right at the far end was this, I thought, quite old man on the phone, far away over there with a white carpet between us. And he signalled, "Come. Come." So I traversed this arctic waist towards his desk. He signalled me, you know, "Sit down, sit down." So I sat like very obedient. And then he slammed the... He went flushed and he slammed the phone down. And he said, he said, "That was Linton, they won't give me Lennon Grad." And I thought, "I'm in Hollywood." Can you imagine. Only in Hollywood a producer can say, "They won't give me Lennon Grad." Wonderful. So now I knew I was in the big time here, sitting talking to somebody who could talked like that. As a matter of fact, they didn't give us Lennon Grad, they gave us Madrid instead 'cause it's more or less the same century, the same era. Funny isn't it? But I loved Sam. I mean, he was a devil, but he had a wonderful side and a terrible side. I think you can say that about everybody. But his was just a bit bigger and worser than everybody's You know, he was a fantastic character. Clever man.

– Trudy: He sometimes called himself Sam P. Eagle, didn't he?

– Suzman: S. P. Eagle was his proper name. S. P Eagle. But he was a very interesting guy. He knew everybody's name on the set from the lowliest gaffer, to the coffee boys, to the whoever. He knew all their names. He was very smart. He used to ring me up a lot in the evening, and use to day, "What are we going to do about Rasputin?" But I said, "Sam, the story of Rasputin is quite good enough. Don't muck around with it." We had a wonderful woman called Moura Budberg. Baroness Budberg, she was brought onto the set to teach us protocol. How you (indistinct), and how you bow and how you do... And she had been, she said, and I believed every word of it, she'd been invited to supper at Prince Yusupov's house the night that Rasputin was murdered by Prince Yusupov. And she said, "We were upstairs waiting. He was late. He was very late for dinner. Little did we know what was going on downstairs."

– Trudy: Totally amazing.

– Suzman: "Little did we know." Well, indeed.

– Trudy: I mean, you've been in so many interesting films. I'm looking at films of Jewish interest now. You, of course, were in "Voyage of the Damned," which I think is an extraordinarily good film. That's of course about the voyage of the St. Louis.

– Suzman: It's an amazing story.

– Trudy: Yeah. Incredible story and a tragic story. I'm sure most of our students know...

– Suzman: But I played a Nazi mistress in that.

– Trudy: Yes, I know. And a very beautiful mistress.

– Suzman: I was a scarlet woman.

– Trudy: Yeah. But you look absolutely magnificent in it. So with the Hollywood film, you presumably would read the script. I presume a lot of the actors didn't even bother to read the full script to them.

– Suzman: Never. You always read a script.

– Trudy: You would, but I would...

– Suzman: Oh no, they would. Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

– Trudy: I remember Leslie Howard saying that he never read the whole script of "Gone With the Wind," he couldn't bear it. I wonder.

– Suzman: It was rather long, I would say.

- Trudy: Your colleagues, and talk about "Priests of Love" where you played Freida Lawrence.

- Suzman: Great film, nice film about D.H Lawrence.

- Trudy: Yes.

- Suzman: Was the most wonderful film to film because we went to all the best locations. We went to Florence to the Lawrence's house above Florence in Fiesole.

- Suzman: We went to Lake Garda where they had a house. We went to Mexico, New Mexico. The great thing was acting with Ava Gardener on that film.

- Trudy: What was that like? 'Cause she also was a legend, wasn't she?

- Suzman: Oh, she was amazing. She was amazing. It was rather low budget film, so we had terrible little caravans on these desolate Mexican hillsides with lots of dry grass, pampas grass and a little fan going in it, you know. And it was hot like today. And I remember Ava sitting in her slip. We were all very sweaty and hot and had to wear these kind of winter show costumes and everything. And so we used to get out of them when we were in the caravan just to cool off. And I remember Ava saying, "Elizabeth wouldn't be (indistinct) in one of these." This made me laugh. (indistinct) would not have accepted that caravan. She was a trooper.

- Trudy: That was an interesting cast as well. You had Penelope Keith. But then in "Nicholas and Alexandra," it was also an amazing cast.

- Suzman: Amazing. Well, Sam could attract all the big names. They can be attracted into movies of that stature. And they come and they play their amazing cameo and then they fly back home. So no, there were extraordinary people. Irene Worth was wonderful. She was played my mother-in-law. A great actress. She was terrific.

- Trudy: Laurence Olivier was in it, if I remember. Michael Jayston played Czar. It always made me cross that film. It was a wonderful film, but they were so terribly antisemitic. It's just, you know, the story.

- Suzman: They didn't know any better, they were idiots. They were idiots, come on. People who are antisemitic don't know better, let's get this straight. People who are stupid enough to be antisemitic just don't know how stupid they are. You know, come on. And nobody told them anything, and you realise... I mean, one of the brilliant things about that film, I think, was that Sam Spiegel, himself or Jew of course, chose to tell the story from the windows of the nursery.

Nursery viewpoint of the Russian Revolution. That's what made the film work brilliantly.

– Trudy: It still works. You know, sometimes you look at films...

– Suzman: But that's because of that choice, I think, you know?

– Trudy: "Piece of Love" still works. They show that quite often, actually. I've watched it about three... Another film I wanted to bring up is, of course, "Leon the Pig Farmer."

– Suzman: Oh God. Yes.

– Trudy: I don't know if our students know that. It's a very strange film where a young man discovers that, in fact, he's from a very conventional Jewish family. You, of course, played the Jewish mother, that in fact he is the real child of pig farmer. I mean, it was a hysterical idea. Did you enjoy it, making it?

– Suzman: We had enormous fun. Didn't get paid anything. Did it for love. Well, just because Gary Senior wanted us to do it.

– Trudy: He's a nice guy.

– Suzman: He's a sweetie pie. But yeah, that's... I don't show off about that one too much.

– Trudy: No, no. It was, what should we say? It was a window of an oddity and interesting for our audience.

– Suzman: Well, I did it as a sort of nice game really. It was, you know, it was nice.

– Trudy: You've had such a rich career in so many ways. You've got the great theatre, good television, great movies, also few detective films, which I love.

– Suzman: Everybody loves detective films. I suppose I do. But they, you know, they're not very interesting to do.

– Trudy: I think "Morse", the episode of "Morse" you are in. I think "Morse" is a great series. One of the great... They don't make them like that anymore.

– Suzman: No, it was a great series. You're quite right. He was a great series. And it... I tell you my favourite, you might not want to ask me this, but I will tell you. My favourite long running thing that I did ever was called "Play Hanger." It as Arnold Bennett's Clay Hanger Trilogy. A marriage in up north. Five towns.

- Trudy: Yes.

- Suzman: And I have to say, it's frightfully good.

- Trudy: Yes. And why on earth aren't they making films like that anymore for television?

- Suzman: Well, it's not, it's a mini series, it's quite different. They don't make stuff like that for television anymore because it has to have lots of sex, and lots of murder, and lots of blood. And then one fantastic detective, breakthrough woman in the centre. Now, which is good, which is good for actresses, but I don't know, people are fixated on women's corpses. It's a bit disturbing really.

- Trudy: Okay. I'm going to completely. because if this wasn't enough, this huge career in theatre and in film for which you won many awards and accolades, let's talk about Janet the director, particularly in South Africa, because I find that absolutely fascinating. The Market theatre, please. And could you tell the audience about the market theatre, because those who aren't South African might not know about it.

- Suzman: Yeah, well, it was founded in 1976 by a bit of a genius guru called Barney Simon, who you might find Peter Brook, alas, died quite recently. But Peter Brook very much reckoned Barney Simon. He was the Barney Simon... He was the Peter Brook of South Africa, you put it that way. He opened the Market Theatre as a place of refuge, really, from the catastrophe of apartheid. Where was there to go where you could have freedom of speech or, you know, where you could just be human being instead of party to a political catastrophe. And it was downtown Johannesburg. There was an old Indian market and it was built octagonally. And you could go into this old Indian market, very Victorian, had a wonderful tin roof, and you could still see notices saying, "Fish," all Afrikaans notices, . Some people would know that means, "Don't spit, no spitting." Anyway, they changed this Market Theatre into... This old market into the Market Theatre. And it became pretty much internationally, you know, much honoured and admired because suddenly there was a place where people could say the truth. And so I did Othello there in 1987 because I went to see my friend, John Kani. John Kani is a wonderful actor. His home language is Xhosa. And I went to see a play, and I saw him being valiant in a not very good play. And I thought, "Oh, my friend, you deserve something better." And at interval that evening in the Market Theatre, I thought, "Well, heavens, why not? That's what he's got to play, he's got to play a Othello. It's so obvious." And I went back home and read my mother's limited editions version of Othello, all the S's, F's or S's, and it was terribly difficult to read. And I read it through, and as I read it through very carefully till 3:00 AM I thought, "Why has nobody seen this before? Because a Othello quite simply, well to simplify the plot, is the story of a black man who's humiliated by a

white thug, Jago. That's the story of Othello. And so I thought, "This has got to be played. This is what is happening in South Africa." So I got Barney and Manny Manim, who was the manager of the theatre, together. And somehow or other we convinced the ANC in exile. John was worried that he would be doing a white play. And I had to convince Wally Serote, who was then the sort of cultural department in exile of the ANC, that in fact Shakespeare was a protest playwright, which he is. Undercover of everything. He got away with murder in his own Jacobean world. And now he was going to be used by Suzman and Company to say the truth about everything in the 20th century. And it was a great adventure because it's a play about sex, it's a play about colour, it's a pay about bad people, and it's also play about good people, which is how the world is. And it caused a bit of a sensation, I have to say. And John Kani I thought was wonderful because there was a kind of innocence about him, which instead of hank-like a Othello, instead of this huge lumbering general that strides the stage, he was slightly delicate and vulnerable as Othello. And I thought he was marvellous. And I had wonderful Desdemona, and had a wonderful Jago, had wonderful everybody. All of them South Africans, all of them worked like the very devil. Because if you've never done Shakespeare before, getting through a three hour play of that denseness, and extremity and passion is quite something. But it was the best time of my life, really.

– Trudy: I can see the passion.

– Suzman: Yeah, it was wonderful. It's wonderful coming to bring something to fruition. To bring what's in your head onto the stage if you can do that. And we did. I had the most wonderful designer, Johan Engels, who's no longer with us, alas, great stage designer. Dewalk Aukemar who did the lighting. No, it was a great experience, because of poor theatre, I like poor theatre. I think theatre is at its most powerful in disabled countries where people are lacking something and the play can say something to them. I'll leave it at that.

– Trudy: What was the reaction of the audience?

– Suzman: Some of them walked out. I heard seats, clunk, clunk, clunk and walking out when Othello and Desdemona kissed. And I thought, "Good, good. That's disturbed them."

– Trudy: It was a mixed audience. This is one of the few... The only place, the only place.

– Suzman: Yes, yes, it was mixed. Most interesting of all was I cut what I cut. And they said to me, "It's too long, it's too long. You've got to cut it more." And I said, "How long is a piece of string? If it holds the audience, it will hold the audience." So it did, it did, for all its length. But the most important thing was the black audience climbed as we did the run of... We only did six weeks 'cause they

didn't think it would run for more than six weeks in Johannesburg, but it did. It ran that length with very good houses, wonderful houses. Usually the black audience for the players in the market were about 15%. Now it was climbing 20, 30, 40, 50, 60% black audiences were coming in. I used to bump into kids coming from Soweto, lounging about on a Monday, 'cause that was what we called "Twofers Night" two for the price of one seat, so they were cheaper. "And why are you coming to this?" "I heard it was good." Because Othello, Shakespeare's Othello doesn't patronise anybody. It's not a patronising view of the black man in any kind of way. So they knew that there was an honourable thing going on. I think that was it really.

– Trudy: Sounds extraordinary. And also, you put on "Brecht", didn't you?

– Suzman: I did. I did "Brecht, a Good Person of Szechwan." Because that's about poverty. Can you be poor and good? If you're very poor, do you have to steal in order to live? That's what that play's about. So you see, I always like these great plays that are referring something to the audience that are seeing them. It makes it so much more cracking and...

– Trudy: It makes them think, doesn't it? That's the whole purpose.

– Suzman: It makes them feel, you know. "They're telling my story. They're telling my story on there."

– Trudy: Storytelling.

– Suzman: Well, an audience is the most important thing in a theatre. Imagine plays without audiences, it's the most miserable thing in the world. So the, you know, the audience matters.

– Trudy: Did you ever do any workshops around your plays in South Africa?

– Suzman: No. Just the rehearsals. They were workshops really.

– Trudy: But theater's a wonderful way of communicating, isn't it then?

– Suzman: It's the way. It's the way. I was in touch with people in Israel doing theatre with Palestinians. It's the only way to break down barriers, to get kids to get together in the same room and tell the same story.

– Trudy: I think I'm going to stop there because you are absolutely an extraordinary woman. I'm stopping because I can see so many questions. So let me have a look. If you don't mind taking some questions, Janet.

Q & A and Comments

Q: "Were you friendly with Antony Sher?" I'm asked.

A: Afraid not. I didn't work with him at all. He was that way in doing his stuff, and I was doing something else. And so, no.

– You'll like this. Pamela, "I was taught at Kingsmead post D.V. Thompson, but Miss Cumberland taught me as well. She was known as Dizzy to the girls, unofficially, but her name was Desiree.

– Thank you! It was Desiree.

– Alan says, "I will remember the process on Jan Smuts Avenue with the police beating up the students."

– Yeah. Yeah.

– And this is from Geater Con–

Q: "Janet, your performance as Rose in Manchester was flawless and apparently effortless. How difficult it was it to learn and perform?"

A: Quite. Well, the older you get the the harder it gets to remember stuff. I wish this muscle in the head that was your memory muscle got better at it. But unfortunately through some strange life of its own, it doesn't.

– Oh, I disagree. You've gone through that.. You've given us an incredible tour de force of your bringing out from your memory Palace. Barbara says, "I just want to say..." Barbara, "I want to say hello to Suz. Tell her Barbara sends best wishes."

– Oh, Suz. Yes, that's what they called me.

– Oh, Jonathan's asking something controversial–

Q: "Who d'you think wrote Shakespeare?" You don't want to answer that.

A: Tell Jonathan to just go and have a bath.

Q: "Did you work with Peter Brook?"

A: Only tangentlier. Tangentlier. No, I never did a play with him.

– This is from Andrea. She said she saw Paul Robson at Stratford in 1959 and Olivia was in the audience." Wow. Robson was an amazing man.

– Robson, he played Othello. Is that what he's talking about?

- Yes. I think it's...

- Peggy Ashcroft played Desdemona. Paul Robson played Othello. Yes. He'd been a very noble, noble, noble Othello.

- He was a very noble man, wasn't he? This is from Jennifer. "Thank you very much for the beautiful experience for such a brilliant artist. Yes, this is a masterclass, not only in acting but in the beauty of speech." It's a lovely compliment.

- Thank you very much.

- Oh, this is a nice question-

Q: "Who are the single male and female actor and actress who you would want on your desert island as a companion? Chaste," he says.

- Chaste companion?

- Spelt C-H-A-S-T-E.

- Chaste companion?

- Yeah.

A: To share an island with an actor or actress I think would be hell.

- I love it. There's your answer, Jonathan.

- I ain't going to do this. I mean, would she perform better than me at diving, or making a hut, or hanging up a or something? I think there'd be a lot of fighting on.

- There's a lovely point here, and I don't know if there's any producers listening, but this is the one danger.

Q: "Dame Janet, have you worked with Maggie Smith? We would fly across the world to watch you act together."

A: No, and I would love to. She's great. Yeah. No, I never have.

- Oh, this is from Dennis. "We've got a very, very erudite audience. The same night as JFK's murder, November the 22nd, 1963 was Benjamin Britten's 50th birthday, celebrated by a revival of his opera "Gloriana" composed 10 years earlier for the Coronation."

- But mine was more murderous. Mine had the link to Jack Kennedy through the drama itself, I suppose, which "Gloriana" wouldn't have had. But it's not a who's best about that horrible event. Thank you.

Yeah, yeah it was...

– And this is another compliment. "Just a comment to remind you of your Freedom of the City of London event. I wish to thank you again for your wonderful reading of funny burns letters and John Keats given by you and Simon Russel Beale. It was a pure joy to sit in awe of you."

– Thank you so much yeah.

– Lots, and lots, and lots of comments. And Monty's asking–

Q: "Do you have a particular way of learning lines?"

A: Just do it. I mean, I don't know. I don't know. You just have to slog at it. Little tricks. They're little tricks, but good enough to get them into your head and stay there unless you really know them.

– This is from Jonathan–

Q: "What do you think of Me Too now? Was it bad in your day? The Me Too Hollywood thing?"

A: I am very glad Me Too has happened for all the girls that have been mistreated and maltreated. I didn't, I think I was too, I don't know, I wasn't a little bimba number. I sort of would've liked to have been in a way, but I wasn't. And so...

– I think they would've been terrified of you.

– But I wasn't the sort of girl that... I don't know. I haven't asked myself this question, and I don't want to ask it at 84.

– If you can't imagine someone like are like Sam Spiegel. You came from the Royal Shakespeare Company. That's that a different....

– I'm sorry darling, he respected me too much because of my Shakespeare. He wouldn't have tried any seduction measures. But he was very generous to me. Old Sam baby. Yeah. No, he was a wicked old fart, but he was lovely.

– Oh, Jennifer's asked–

Q: "How did you like acting with Marlon Brando?"

A: Oh, the ultimate. And he was just wonderful. My jaw dropped. No, he was a great actor.

– You've really... Not only are you wonderful, you've played with most of the greats, haven't you?

- Michael Kane.

- Yeah.

- He's another great actor.

- He is so underrated. I think he's so good.

- He can't be underrated. He's exactly right rated. He's adored.

- I think he's a brilliant... Anyway, I love it when you and I disagree. Anyway. Excellent. Love Shakespeare. Love you. Could listen all day. Thank you so much for sharing. Please come back. You made our day.

This is Janet-

Q: "Is there a part you've wished you'd done? What has been your criteria for accepting roles?"

A: Just got to be good.

Q: Any mistakes?

A: Yes. I'm not going to tell any of them now.

- Trudy: Good.

- No.

- And this is from Janet-

Q: "How has political correctness impacted content?"

A: Oh, well I think these days very much, which makes me not want to do drama at all. be careful about thoughts.

- It's very serious. I know that some...

- Very serious, what is happening is very, very serious. Platforming and disappearing people down a vortex of hate and everything is just dreadful.

- It's actually quite fascistic, isn't it, in my view?

- Well, it's also has a mental fragility, which is very concerning. It means people don't want to be shocked, or surprised, or interested in things other than themselves. And I find that really horrifying. Anyway, we mustn't go there.

- A lot of people are really thanking you. And Sonya in particular says, "Thank you for resurrecting members of Market Theatre and for explaining to non-South Africans what a revelation it was to see and hear the truth."

- Yeah. Good. Wonderful. Thank you.

- And this is from Mel-

Q: "I saw a production of "The Balcony" in Joburg during apartheid. Was that part of the Market Theatre?"

A: Yes it was. I just gestured then, 'cause I did a production of "The Balcony" in Oxford when I was a kid. Yeah, it's quite a play. Okay.

- This is from Yehudi Wade. "Last play that Michael Wade, my late husband and quiet South African hero, was another time with Janet Suzman and Albert Finney."

- Oh, thank you. Yeah.

- And she's on.

- Oh, that's nice. Thank you.

- That's one of the joys of Wendy's Lockdown. It's extraordinary. The people who come up. And Brenda Yablon-

- Q: "Did you personally ever encounter antisemitism?"

A: No, actually not. The theater's a pretty broad church, and no. And if I had, there would've been, you know, ructions.

- Yeah, that I can imagine.

- No, I haven't. My people might be secretly so, but not to my face and not in my hearing, and not ever. No. No.

- This is from Gail. "I love the way you say you need to stand up to learn Shakespeare. Wonderful that your teacher pranced around the room. Thanks for the honest and genuine way you answer."

- This is from Barry-

Q: "Looking back on your life, would you do anything if you did it... Would you do anything different if you did it again?"

A: Yes. But again, I'm not going to go down that. This is like that poem where two roads part in the woods. Do you take the left hand or

the right hand pathway? It's so complicated. No I don't do Piaf, although she sings it like a dream, because of course you regret stuff. If you don't regret anything, there's something wrong with you. Of course you regret stuff. Everybody regrets doing stuff. Everybody makes mistakes or a wrong choice. If you've had a sort of, spiritually, I don't know, cleaving life where everything you do is perfect, and great, and you stand by it, then maybe it's a wonderful thing. But maybe also it's a bit worrying. I think lots of us do funny things and shouldn't have.

– I suppose in terms of theatre though, is there any play that you wish you'd done or any film that you'd wish that...

– That I wish I'd done?

– Yeah.

– Film? No, because each film is individual.

– There's no part you're yet to play.

– As a part-time yet to play. I think I'm too old for most of them now, frankly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Show me an 83 year old (indistinct). It doesn't work. Honestly. I've done them. I've been so lucky. I've played fabulous, wonderful parts.

– They are writing good parts now for older actresses and actors, I've noticed, because maybe they're the only ones who can still act. Don't answer that please.

– Oh, there's certainly the only ones... There's something changed in the way people address, I can only speak about the English language, I can't speak about other languages, but the English language is often, I hardly want to say debased, but so simplified and sort of made uncomplicated that it becomes tedious. I think complications are the only interesting thing in life, frankly. Not simplifications, complications. And so, you know, that sort of undertow, that subtext of things is what makes acting wonderful. To find what's underneath what people mean. That's what's wonderful. I mean, Hedda Gabler looks out the window and she says, "Oh, the leaves are autumnal. There are autumn leaves on the tree." And you know she doesn't mean that. She means those are withering, they're going to fall. And that's to do with her life. You know, I'm taking a very simplistic little image it, but it has layers to it. It's not just autumn leaves on a tree, it's something else as well. And that's what's interesting about...

– You're getting so many compliments, Janet.

– Jack asks–

Q: "What was your relationship with your aunt Helen?"

A: Good, but I never saw her much, she was busy in Cape Town. That's the trouble with, you know... Cape Town pulled her away from Joburg a lot. But you know, what a force. Fantastic.

– This is from Jonathan–

Q: "Did you ever cross the borders of the guidelines of the secret police during the eighties?"

A: Yes. I got called before a certain lieutenant (indistinct), Marshal Square. And he asked me about this and that. Thank you very much. So I must have. Yeah, I did.

– Jennifer's asked a very difficult question–

Q: "How do you find the subtext beneath the printed words?"

A: No, you're not going to get a class from me, Jennifer.

– That's a term teaching, isn't it?

– Yes. Could be a year or two.

– And she also asked–

Q: "Do you have a favourite opera?"

A: Yes. I did a production of the "Marriage of Figaro" at the Royal Academy a few years ago. And it was one of the best experiences of my life. I had Jane Glover as the conductor with me. That was a wonderful experience. So my favourite opera is "The Marriage of Figaro" at the moment. Yes. And "Billy Budd," maybe.

– The last question is actually about Sir Ronald Harwood–

Q: "What was your relationship with him and his work?"

A: Friendly and social. Really. It was very nice to do "Another Time" with him, his play. But he is very easygoing guy, Ronald, Ronnie. Yes. But you know, it was more social because apart from that, he didn't interfere when we did the play at all. He didn't come in and be a boring writer saying it shouldn't be this, it should be that. That was good.

– It's interesting. My last comment to you is, when you talked about your time as a director in South Africa, that absolutely seethed with passion.

– Oh, because, listen. I think the land of your birth is like your parents. You're landed with it. It's in your blood. There's nothing you can do about it. It stays with you. The land you land up in is a bit like your spouse. You chose it, it either works or it doesn't. Hopefully it'll work. But it doesn't have the same visceral connection to you as your childhood. The place where you grew up as a child is where the imagery goes deep and the feelings go deep because you are waking up to the world in your childhood. And so South Africa, I, you know, it's like Russians longing for the of Russia, mother Russia. You know, all this stuff.

– Janet, you're wonderful. I'm going to hand over to Wendy now because I'm sure she's got some thoughts on this.

– Wendy: No, I wanted to say thank you for that wonderful presentation and sharing your very exciting and successful, incredibly successful life with us. Janet, you know, I also went to Kingsmead.

– Did you?

– I did, yeah. I went to Kingsmead and Wits. Yeah, I knew John Kani well. Spent time at the Market Theatre. So it was a trip down memory lane. Yeah. And I just wanted to say, you are always an icon. We were always so proud of you. We always claimed you, "She's our South African and Jewish."

– Oh no, that's so sweet. the South African thing, God knows why because it's led us a merry dance, hasn't it?

– It really has. But I have to say, I love being South African, and I really love South African family. And, yeah, always happy to wrap my arms around all of us South Africans.

– All of us. There's something... You just, yeah, you feel it. It's nice.

– It's the heart. It's the heart. And the warmth, and the honesty.

– And the vowels. And the vowels.

– My kids say geese, whenever they are,

– Yeah. It's like the best of them, me too. Me too.

– Me too. Yeah, they're constantly mocking me. So thanks very, very much. That was fabulous, a real treat. And Trudy, thank you very much as well.

– Yes, thank you, Trudy.

– Thank you, Janet. It's wond... I feel that we should interview you every week, actually. I want masterclasses.

– Absolutely, Absolutely. And now just to say to our people online, we are now leaving on a high, but in an hour's time if you want to be brought down on a low, join us with an hour with Dr. Jonathan Shanzer, who will be evaluating Operation Breaking Dawn and what's next for Gaza and Israel.

– Oh boy, that's a big one.

– Yeah, so we just... You know, I just feel like we've got the resources and I get constant feedback and updated on what's going on, you know, globally. And when I can share it, I like to share it. And he, you know, Carly and Jonathan offered to do a presentation for our participants. So I thought, "Why not?"

– Yeah, no, it's good, I think.

– So there we go. So Janet, a million thanks.

– Pleasure. Pleasure. Have a lovely everything, everybody.

– Thank you. And to you and to everybody else. Enjoy the rest of the evening. Thanks, everybody. Thanks, Jude. Bye-bye.

– Bye.