

INTERVIEW *with* JENNIFER EHLE

— VIA TINA DOAN
@JENNIFEREHLE.BLOGSPOT.COM

PART I: CAREER & PROFESSION

PLANS

1.) *The Philadelphia Story* (TPS) is coming to the end of its run. How do you feel about that – are you tired of it, or will you miss it? Do you have any pranks planned? (We won't tell, promise!)

~ If I could move *The Old Vic* to the field behind our house, then I would be thrilled. I have made some good friends and feel like I am still growing in the part so am sorry to see it coming to an end.

2.) What are your plans after TPS closes? [Sandra] Are there plans for a Broadway transfer? If so, would you continue as Tracy? [Julie L]

~ The only plans I have at the moment are home and cooking and friends and family, watching *The Daily Show* plus this past season of *24* on DVD; and being reunited with our dog.

3.) You have a wonderful accent - both English and American. Have you ever been asked (or thought) about doing a voice-over for an animated film? [Sandra] Have you narrated any other books besides *Witch Child*, *The Tempest* and *Cause Celeb*? [Evelyn] When and on what program was the latter broadcasted?

~ Would love to do a voice on an animated movie.

Cause Celeb was a taped radio broadcast for the BBC (I think it was the BBC) and so, *Witch Child* is the only book on tape I have ever done. I had been curious about doing one for a while and they asked and well, I enjoyed doing it. Would be interested to do some more sometime but it has not been convenient these past few years.

4.) Are there any mother/daughter projects you'd like to engage in, and are any lined up? [Chelsea] Have you ever been onstage together, or would you ever consider doing so? You'd both be great in "*The Royal Family*"! [Waylon, "a huge fan of your mother's"]

~ Mum and I would love to work together on stage sometime. One day it will happen. *Royal Family* is a wonderful play, but Mum was perfect in it and I know her performance way too well to try to make Julie my own. Their production (the filmed version, of course — I was only five when the stage version was running, so remember very little bit about it ...) is one of the best things I've ever seen.

When I was sixteen, I did play the nanny (Nurse Peake ... ? ... something like that,) who carries the baby on, in *The Royal Family* at Monomoy Theater on Cape Cod ...

EARLY CAREER & MOTIVATIONS

6.) Your mother always recounts the story of her first performance, when she was four. Do you remember your own first performance?

~ My first public performance was as part of the 'birthday party' that passes-by in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I was less than 2 years-old, but remember it — remember going across the back of the stage during one of the performances and seeing Mum in the quick-change room (that was supposed to be the bathroom where Blanche was having her bath) and her waving and smiling and putting her finger to her lips to remind me not to say her name aloud.

And I remember the feeling of all those hundreds of people sitting out there in the dark on the other side of the set. It was an awesome feeling but not a scary one; oddly comforting.

My first credited performance was that of a tree in *Where The Wild Things Are*, at a summer day-camp outside of NYC. I was five.

My second performance — this was in fifth grade — was as an Eskimo woman whose fingers were cut off and turned into the first seals. She then became a Goddess, but I didn't get to do that bit. My bits were the woman cooking in her igloo, being abducted and having her fingers cut off ... the best bits, really. It was a puppet play but the puppets were huge and we moved beside them wearing black clothes with black hoods. I screamed well, I think.

7.) Who are your role models in and out of acting, and why? Have you ever had a mentor? (Unanswered)

8.) Are there any people - actors, directors, etc. - you'd really like to work with? (Unanswered)

9.) You have said that the reason you got into acting was that you had a "chromosome glitch" that made you want to pretend to be somebody else. Why did you want to escape yourself? Is this still your primary motivation, and if not, what has replaced it? You've also said that you were inspired by how much fun your mother had - is acting still fun for you? Did you miss it during your break?

~ It is true that I do not crave being someone else anywhere near as much as I once did; but I actually enjoy acting far more now than I ever did before I took my break and 'got a life.'

10.) How much influence did your parents have on you in your choice of acting as a career? How much has your mother influenced you particularly in your career as a stage actress? [Tom]

~ While most kids may be asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" — the question always put to me was, "Are you going to be an actress or a writer?" — and I really never did consider anything else as a possibility.

Having grown up with parents in these quite bohemian, joyous, autonomous careers, I do not see why I would ever have looked much further.

11.) You've said your real education wasn't through drama school but by "doing things". A dozen odd years into your career, are you still learning? What has, for example, being Tracy Lord taught you? What about your time in the RSC? What have you learnt from other actors, and who in particular?

~ I feel I have a larger capacity for learning now, than I ever have before.

12.) Why did you insist on having classical training?

~ I'm not sure that classical training is important. Practice is important and Drama school is just about the only way to get lots of low-risk practice.

Voice training is important, they say; though I never really got the hang of that at Drama school — but now, fifteen years later, it seems to have kicked in. So who knows if that would have happened without four years training ...?

There is nothing that can replace talent and confidence. If anyone can get an agent and work without training, then I'd say go for it.

CHARACTERS

13.) What do you look for in a part? Are there any parts in particular that you'd love to play? You once said it was *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; why? Are there any you've been disappointed to miss out on?

~ If a character tempts my curiosity, feels like a challenge or just seems like a wonderful person to experience playing — and/or is simply a part of a story I'd like to be a part of telling.

Timing is extremely important, of course. I was offered Maggie The Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* not long ago, but it was too soon after having my son and I just couldn't imagine spending all that time at rehearsals, away from him.

14.) Are you influenced by who will direct a particular piece when considering a part? Who do you consider to be the leading UK theatrical director and why? [Alan] (Unanswered)

15.) Which of all the characters you've played do you identify with the most? Which were the easiest and hardest to get inside, and why? [Evelyn, Chelsea] Which are you proudest of? What role did you have the most fun playing? [Chelsea]

~ I've had the most fun playing Valerie, Annie, and Tracy.

Lizzie too, but honestly, I was so tired for a lot of that process, that I could hardly see straight.

Also Hattie Dealing in *Laundry and Bourbon* at The Edinburgh Festival in 1988 or '89 — and Gertie Cummings in *Oklahoma* at Monomoy Theater summer '86.

I loved playing Gertie just for the sheer joy of being in a musical. As a non-singer those opportunities don't come along very often!

(I guess I should just take jobs with 'ie' names, huh?)

The hardest role to get inside of? I don't think that I'll say which ones they are, just in case someone out there liked them. I would hate to interfere with anyone's enjoyment of a story.

The most fun shoots, parts aside, were *Self Catering* and *Paradise Road*.

I don't really think about identifying with them or not identifying with them. That's just not a part of how I look at characters.

16.) The director of *Sunshine* cast you as Valerie because he recognized a strong, independent streak in you, yet you've said that you don't see that in yourself. Why do you think people get that impression about you, given that those traits are present in many other characters you've played as well? e.g. Christabel Lamotte, Lizzy Bennet.

~ Did I really say that I didn't think that I had a strong, independent streak? Huh. Wonder why ...

I know I have a strong, independent streak.

Don't believe anything you read, folks.

17.) In becoming a character, do you ever find pieces of them left behind in yourself, especially if you play them for a long period of time?

~ I love this question. The answer is no, not to any real degree — but I still think it's an interesting question.

18.) Do you find that your emotional state is affected by roles you're playing at the time? In an interview way back in 1986, your mother said playing in *All My Sons* would give her a crushing depression in the morning, whereas with *Hay Fever* she'd wake up thinking "oh, isn't life lovely".

~ My personality may be affected in small ways while playing a character. There will be themes in a piece, or characteristics in a part, that are forefront in one's mind more than they might usually be.

19.) You've called yourself a "snob" when picking roles. Are there any jobs you'd refuse out of hand?

~ I am a script snob. It is true. Nothing you can do to overcome a poor script, imho. Are there any jobs I would turn down out of hand? Yes, and do.

20.) Given the popularity of P&P when it first appeared, it would have been natural to expect you to try to capitalize on its success with your subsequent roles. However, it seems that you went out of your way to try not to be typecast in the same type of roles as Elizabeth Bennet. Can you share how you selected the roles you accepted after P&P and whether a fear of typecasting played a part in those selections? [Tom]

~ When *Pride and Prejudice* came out September of '95, I was already working at The RSC and under contract with them till February of '96 — so there was nothing I could have done to 'capitalize' on the show's success then, even if I had wanted to.

It suited me perfectly to be unavailable; and to sit tight and wait out the hoopla.

Once I was released from The RSC, I just continued to do what I always had done, which was to take the most interesting (to me) jobs that I was offered.

This has changed a little now that I have a family — and am open again to working — but it has not changed a great deal.

Now it has to be the most interesting job that is *also* interesting enough to ask my family to commit to.

I do not feel as though I have ever been type cast. The women I have been lucky enough to play have been complex enough to allow me to use a varied pallet. Although I have played a few women whom I think of as 'warmth-exuders' who stand by their men — they have been quite varied apart from having that quality in common.

21.) I'm glad to see that your 2 newest film projects cast you in the present day. Do you ever feel that you are typecast to characters in earlier times? Do you prefer to play characters in earlier times? [Jillian] Is there a difference in your approach to modern and period characters?

~ Well for one thing there is a lot more 'past' than there is 'present' — if you see what I mean; and so, if anyone from BC to 2000 is considered 'period,' then those are a whole bunch of stories, aren't they?

It always baffles me that stories set in 1805 and 1930 will both be called 'costume drama,' even if they have nothing else in common — and sometimes, even if they are not a drama at all.

22.) You've said you were always quite shy, that acting liberated you. Is there one breakthrough moment you remember? (Unanswered)

23.) Do you think your shyness helps you to better understand the characters you play? [Katie]

~ Empathy does, certainly ... not the same thing as shyness, of course.

24.) In an interview, you commented that you never felt comfortable playing Christabel La Motte: "I never felt I got inside her. It's one of the first times that I had to call on someone else to play a part. I see her as very different from me." Do you feel you always have to share aspects of the character you are portraying? [Evelyn] What if the character's values are foreign to you?

~ I actually felt that Christabel was physically very different from myself — I had pictured her as being a sort of Arthur Rackham fairy/mermaid person, and felt I was more earthy, physically.

Feeling a whole different physical type from a character was frustrating, because I knew my image would be the strongest impression, and it was not the impression I could see as being right for her. When I saw the film I was pleased that the mermaid quality had actually come across.

As to having different values from a character; that does not ever occur to me as being an issue. It's just storytelling, and that is the fun of it — to try on different mantels than one would usually wear.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS CAREER

25.) "Acting itself is a collection of short chapters and I wonder, at the end of each one, whether I want to keep on reading or put the book down." (1999, Flicks). What chapter are you up to?

~ Did I say that? I like it.

Right now, with work, I am in a page-turner kind of mood and want to keep looking for interesting things to do — and happy to be at home in the absence of anything interesting work-wise.

I have just gone with a new agency in the US now — Endeavor — (my previous agent retired) with Bonnie Bernstein in NYC and with Brian Swardstrom in their LA office. I am excited to be working with them.

26.) Do you want that movie career? Are you disappointed that you haven't gotten "the role" that might make you a household name? [Melissa] What is your relationship with ambition now?

~ I am glad that I have not had 'that role' in movies. I consider it a blessing. I would love to do more films, and to have a bit more (and I do mean only a little bit more) access to good roles in that medium one day; but I'm not in any rush. Life is long.

As to my relation with ambition now? Well, I find that I am more confident as I get older — and far more clear in my own head about what I want and don't want — and so, not as worried by other people's interpretation of who or what they think I am.

And people seem to approach me for interviews now, with more of an understanding of what kind of person I am; so that makes it easier all round. Interviews do not panic me as much as they used to. I don't like them (and still do as few as politely/contractually possible,) but they are a necessary evil.

As to why I am answering your questions? Well, it is pretty perfect for me, really — there is no media *interpreter* and I assume that you are an interested audience, because you asked the questions yourselves. They are also some damn good questions here.

I love the women I have played and it is a rare treat to be able to chat about them with people who appear to like them, too.

27.) You've said that you've wondered whether writing was the path you should've taken instead of acting. Does this doubt still plague you? Was there ever a crossroads sort of moment? Are you writing now; if so, what form? Are you ever going to pursue it seriously? [Chelsea, Karen]

~ I am not a writer, but I am an extremely talented reader. I have always read voraciously and still do. Fiction is my first love and I still read a ton of it. As an adult, I have never seriously tried to write a story myself — I don't think that I have one to tell. But I enjoy reading other people's; and sometimes being able to take part in playing them out.

28.) Is it intimidating trying to write, with both your dad and husband in the profession? Do you think one profession is worthier than the other? (Unanswered)

ACTING AS A PROFESSION

29.) Once upon a time you hid behind Portaloos when wanted for interviews. Has your attitude to the media changed? What possessed you to agree to this interview? We are all astonishment. [See Question #26]

30.) Both your parents' marriage and yours consists of a writer-actor union; do you think there is a similarity in mindset between the two professions?

~ I don't know about that, in general. I can't imagine that there is anyone else out there that I would be as happily married to; writer or not.

31.) What are the characteristics of a good actor? What do you consider your own flaws and strengths to be? Is your strength comedy or tragedy/drama? (Unanswered)

32.) An underlying theme in your interviews has been your abhorrence of the Actor stereotype – vanity, self-obsession, arrogance, etc. Did this grow from particular experiences?

~ I'm sure that past interviews might read as if I have an abhorrence of the actor stereotype, since I used to find, in interviews, that the interviewer would *approach* me as a stereotype — and so my attention during the interview would

focus on clearing up their preconception — and guarding against being misinterpreted based on that preconception — or become based on my feeling for the need to clear their preconception up.

I don't really find that actors fit the stereotype. But I do think most people assume that actors fit the stereotype; and that used to bother me.

Some of my best friends are actors ...

33.) Despite this stereotype, by rights actors should be particularly empathetic people, since their life's work is standing in others' shoes. Do you think this is true? Has playing Sophie, Tracy or other flawed characters helped you be more tolerant of human frailties?

~ I have always had a surfeit of empathy, but now as I get older and have more in my life that I wish to protect, I find, with some relief, that I am able, when necessary, to fight my corner without imagining (or imagining that I am imagining) what everyone else's point of view might be.

34.) As an actor, can you suspend disbelief long enough to watch films/ plays/TV without thinking about the technicalities of performance? Especially if there are people you know in the work? Can you bear to watch yourself?

~ If a something is good enough then I am still sucked into it. I might be watching technically too, but that doesn't have to get in the way.

Actually, I don't seem to be able to watch movies much anymore ... but I don't think that that is because of what I do for a living; but because as a mother, I am so used to multitasking that I find just sitting and being told a story rarely does it for me anymore. A play, movie or book has to be really, really good to hold my attention these days and I am inclined towards things in the lighter vein.

35.) In the past you've been of the opinion that actors shouldn't be "oracles," speaking out politically. Why is that? Have you ever been tempted?

~ Did I say that? I wonder why.

My favorite hat is a baseball cap that I had embroidered with, *We are all wearing the blue dress now.*

And the gay marriage issue irks me mightily. Why anyone thinks that marriage can only be between a man and woman baffles me. I do not see how it is even anyone's business.

36.) You've said you avoid Hollywood because of the pressure to be young and beautiful. Do you feel this pressure nonetheless - you've said you're "no waif"? How do you deal with it? (Unanswered)

37.) Why is there such a lack of strong parts for women, in your opinion?

~ This is such a complicated question; and I am having trouble distilling my thoughts on it down to anything concise.

I think that in our culture we are simply not used to having our myths and stories told through the woman — so that stories which do have female protagonists are usually relegated to being about being female, rather than being human.

Most of the women in our stories are devices which enable the (usually) male protagonist's tale to be told; and so, we usually watch the women, rather than see through their eyes.

38.) What advice would you give to an aspiring actress? Is there something that someone told you during your career that you really remember? Or something that you've learned over the years that you wished you knew earlier? [Julie] (Unanswered)

TECHNICAL STUFF

39.) Do you use a particular acting technique (e.g. Method)? How do you prepare for a role? [Evelyn] What's more important: research, intuition or observation?

~ Intuition.

40.) Do you still feel nervous before you get onstage? Have you ever had stage fright? What was it like getting back onstage the first night of TPS, after several years away?

~ There are tingly nerves and excitement and anticipation and the 'standing on the high dive' feeling — and that is all delicious.

I always prefer not to know if there is anyone specific in the audience. Even if it is simply a neighbor of a friend-of-a-friend; or another cast member's second-cousin-once-removed. Usually it doesn't matter at all, but it's safer just to tell everyone not to tell me. Feeling self-conscious up there is not helpful.

That said, there are a couple of people whom I adore to know are out there.

I was so excited to get back on a stage after having been away for a while, it was lovely just to want to be up there again.

41.) If your mother has grown gills for the stage, you appear to be amphibious, equally comfortable in a variety of media. But is there one — film, stage, TV, audio — you prefer? [Evelyn, Saba]

~ I love filming, but theater appeals more at the moment. Used to be the other way round. Bound to change again and again and again.

42.) Have you ever differed with a director's insight into a character that you have been asked to play? If so, do you follow the director or your instincts? [Evelyn]

~ It's tricky. It all depends on the chemistry and the politics and the nature of the job. Not getting on with or trusting a director is a horrible situation to be in, especially in theater. But to work with a director when there is mutual trust and respect — that is a wonderful thing.

I tell my Mother that she is 'director proof.'

43.) It must be difficult to perform the same play every night. Do you find ways to alter the character, without throwing your fellow actors off? [Evelyn]

~ I love the repetition! It's the best. I generally improve with the more I get to play something. Not always, but generally. The beautiful thing about theater is that it always works in progress.

As Oliver Cotton (Seth Lord in *The Philadelphia Story*) said, "It is always early days until after the last performance."

44.) Is it true that a theatre audience has an impact on an actor's performance? Do you get a feeling on how an audience is reacting to your character? [Evelyn]

~ An audience can become a single entity to an actor — it is hard to remember that there are hundreds of individuals out there. Even with an unresponsive audience it is important to remember that there just might possibly (and probably) be someone out there enjoying themselves.

If something extraordinary and unifying has happened during the day — the first day of a heat wave, a torrential rain storm just before curtain, 'breaking news,' etc. — it affects things well. Those occasions can produce the most electric shows, because everyone, cast and audience, have been unified by their common experience.

Talulah Riley and I called these 'war shows.'

45.) Do you prefer short shoots, or long ones because there is more time and money to get the scenes right? [Gina]

~ I prefer good scripts.

MISCELLANEOUS

46.) What's the funniest or most embarrassing moment you've had when filming (or onstage)? [Chelsea] With the *Crimes of the Heart* incident, what did you do once you realized? (Unanswered)

47.) Do you read your reviews nowadays? If not, how do you get feedback about your work? (Unanswered)

48.) Which of your mother's performances is your favourite? And vice versa?
[Chelsea] (Unanswered)

49.) You've said that Maggie Smith is one of the actresses you admire. Did you know that she was Toby Stephen's mother when you began working with him? [Chelsea]

~ I first saw Toby and his brother, Chris, standing in a doorway in Stratford-Ontario, Canada; when we must have been around the age of eight — maybe a little older.

Didn't meet him again until we did a scene together from *The Seagull*, (Arkadina/Trigorin) when our drama schools each sent a group to take some classes at The Moscow Arts Theater School — and then, a few months later, we were cast together in *The Chamomile Lawn*.

50.) What is the best moment, or best day of your career?

~ Sometimes just the simple things — the arriving at a base in the dark with the make-up trailer all lighted up; a cup of soup in a dixie cup during a night shoot — can be the best.

Being on stage on a 'good' night is the best of all.

Feeling something spontaneous has been caught on film.

Getting a job you want is a wonderful thing, full of delicious anticipation.

I actually really like auditioning too; always have.

51.) Is there any particular line in any of your works that you were really excited to say? e.g. "I have to pee" in *Sunshine* [Chelsea] (Unanswered)

52.) Would you ever do a romantic comedy, and who would you like to have as your leading man? Would you ever consider working with Colin Firth again? [Sandra]

~ Well, if *The Philadelphia Story* isn't a romantic comedy, then I'm not sure what is — and having Kevin as a leading man was very nice indeed.

I think *Bedrooms and Hallways* is a romantic comedy, too.

53.) I enjoyed your splendid performances in *The Real Thing*, *Summerfolk* and now *TPS*. Can you or your Mum ask Tom Stoppard to write a decent female lead in a new play for you? [Alan]

~ Um. Sure. Oh, Tooom?

54.) Which of your theatrical productions did you find the most fulfilling and why? Have you enjoyed revisiting the London theatre scene? [Alan]

~ I found *The Real Thing* and *The Philadelphia Story* most rewarding.

With *The Philadelphia Story*, I felt that the shows opened when I just had the scaffolding in place (six previews was stingy) — but I enjoyed fleshing Tracy out as the run progressed.

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