

One of our greatest Shakespearean actors, Judi Dench, took time out from the 400th-anniversary celebrations to talk to *Sarah Meyrick*

JOEL RYAN/AP



Nothing like a Dame: Judi Dench at the Olivier Awards in London earlier this month

A YEAR or two ago, a new word slipped into the English language. Arguably coined by the British rap artist Lethal Bizzle in 2012, the word “dench” is more or less a synonym for “cool”. Examples include “absolutely dench” and “That was well dench.” Such is the iconic status of the actor of the same name that it was no time before that morphed into “That was well Judi Dench,” or even “well Judi”.

Dame Judi Dench roars with laughter at the term, but declares herself delighted that her surname is being used as street-speak. It is hard to imagine many 81-year-old actors attracting such recognition across the generations, but this is someone whose impeccable pedigree as a classical actor has been almost overtaken by her more recent film work. Her role as “M” in the James Bond franchise introduced her to a whole new generation.

At the last count, she had won six BAFTA film awards, four BAFTA TV awards, eight Olivier Awards, two Screen Actors Guild Awards, two Golden Globes, an Academy Award and a Tony Award.

Last weekend, she took part in the two-hour live BBC broadcast from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. The show, directed by Gregory Doran, and hosted by David Tennant and Catherine Tate, placed Dame Judi in the company of fellow stars, including Sir Ian McKellen, David Suchet, Dame Helen Mirren, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Simon Russell Beale.

Huge cheers greeted her arrival on stage as a remarkable octogenarian Titania, playing opposite Al Murray as Bottom; and equally as an experienced Hamlet giving advice to 25-year-old Paapa Essiedu, who is currently playing the part at the RSC (“It is I, Hamlet the Dame...”).

On the eve of the weekend of Shakespeare celebrations, Dame Judi was in Warwick to open an exhibition at St Mary’s, where a 1623 Shakespeare First Folio and a first edition of the 1611 King James Bible are on display.

"I couldn't be more pleased about being asked to St Mary's," she says. "To be here, and to be able to see the First Folio and the King James Bible is quite overwhelming. They are two of the most beautiful examples of the English language ever. How thrilling to have these two books to visit!"

She adds that she was made to learn a great deal of the at school. "I was about 13. I suppose it was a chore then." Now, she is delighted.

"I'm absolutely 100 per cent devoted to the King James Bible. I find it very difficult to go to church if the King James Bible isn't used, because we learned so much of it. I learned huge swaths. Phrases such as 'Through a glass darkly' . . . the new versions say 'mirror' but that's *wrong*. It's not what it means. I'm always wanting to correct that."

Another reason she is so fond of St Mary's is a personal one. "A great and dear and valued friend was a former Rector, Joseph McCulloch. He played an incredibly important part in my marriage." This, it turns out, is because her adored husband, Michael Williams, who died in 2001, was a Roman Catholic; and she was unhappy at the thought that she and her family would not be able to take communion during the service while he and his family did.

McCulloch, at that time Rector of St Mary-le-Bow, invited Judi and Michael to dinner with Fr Tom Corbishley SJ, and Edward Carpenter, then Dean of Westminster. Between them, they came up with a solution that involved a private nuptial mass and blessing at Farm Street, two days before the wedding at St Mary-le-Bow. (It was only later that they discovered that Fr Corbishley was hauled over the coals for this by his.)

Dame Judi is a Quaker. "My faith is everything, but I don't generally talk about it," she says. Her parents were Methodists, but she attended the Quaker Mount School in York "because I liked the uniform. I used to see these girls with their white white collars and blue uniforms, and I thought 'That's where I want to go.' Luckily, I got in."

The Mount was a boarding school. "We had to go to Meeting on Sundays, and with our brother school on Wednesdays. One Sunday of the term we could go anywhere we liked; so I knew just about every place of worship in York. I found that, when it came to those Sundays, I knew I was much better, and felt in the right place in the Meeting House."

It is something about the silence. "The discipline you have to have to use in the Meeting is very good for the restless soul. I was brought up with two [brothers], and I was generally in some sort of trouble or other. But this was just exactly what I wanted, and has proved to be so since the age of 15."

Is it because it provides a counterbalance to all the words are the staple of her profession? "Maybe," she says. "I need that kind of discipline for my mind. You need quite another kind of discipline when you are learning a part."

IT CAN be hard to find silence elsewhere in her life. "The Meeting is where I get the silence. I hope I get better at carrying it over. I'm not good at the silent bit. I'm not good at being on my own."

As far as prayer goes, she quotes as a favourite the prayer of Jacob Astley before the Battle of Edgehill in 1642: "O Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not thou

forget me.” She is uncertain whether her work constitutes a prayer: “I don’t know. But when I was first working, [the actor] John Neville said to me: ‘You must decide why you are doing this job, and stick to that, and don’t tell anyone.’ I don’t know if that’s prayer, but that is what I did.”

If her faith informs everything she does, I wonder if Shakespeare, in turn, feeds her faith? “It may do. Very often there’s something you absolutely think is so apt, so right. [Shakespeare] was able to sum everything up in a few lines, where you or I would take a whole chapter. Think about ‘When sorrows come, they come not single spies But in battalions.’ He said that. There are bits of Shakespeare that make me come out in goose-bumps.

“Just before he died, Donald Sinden wrote a letter and he said: ‘I have of late (but wherefore I know not) lost all my mirth.’ And of course that was sad, but there’s something that happens to your spirit when you hear these lines.”

DAME JUDI’s first experience of the theatre was when she was seven or eight. “My parents loved the theatre, and took us to the York Rep, and I was completely hooked from the word go. I saw Ben Travers’s *A Cuckoo in the Nest*, and when a man jumped out of a basket at the foot of a bed I laughed so much I made myself sick. Luckily, my mother took me back the next night so that I could find out what happened. And we were always dressing up and performing plays. There was no TV.”

Another formative experience was taking part in the York Mystery Plays, which were revived in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations. It was quite a family undertaking: her father played Annas, and her mother made the costumes. To begin with, the young Judi had parts as a member of the crowd and an angel.

“I don’t know how we were chosen, but we were allowed to be out from school. At the dress rehearsal, we saw great swaths of the play we’d not seen, such as the Creation, and the tempting by Lucifer. We were completely compelled. You start in daylight, and then it’s dark by the crucifixion. It’s fantastically compelling: you’ve got hell on the left, and heaven on the right, and everyone divided. At the very end a small boy is taken by the devil.”

Even having to squat with bent knees for 20 minutes as the young man in white by the tomb did not put her off. Finally, in 1957, she was cast as the Virgin Mary, and she was on her way.

Her parents lived to see her success and that of her brother, the late Jeffery Dench, also a Shakespearean actor. There’s a story about her playing Juliet in Franco Zeffirelli’s production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Old Vic in 1957. When Juliet asked, “Where are my father and my mother, Nurse?” her father replied from the stalls: “Here we are, darling, in Row H.” She insists the story is true. “Yes, and it was absolutely thrilling. Though possibly not for my father.”

One of her most fêted performances came when she played Lady Macbeth in Trevor Nunn’s production at Stratford in 1976. She tries to find the humanity in any part. “Lady Macbeth is often described as evil. But I think, if you look at the play very carefully — I don’t think she is this villainess everyone says. Otherwise . . . why does she need to conjure spirits to make her able to do the job? If she was that strong, there would be no need to ask for that strengthening.

“She’s also driven by her passion for [Macbeth], and he for her. He calls her ‘dearest chuck’. She shores him up, and she grows in her strength.”

A MORE recent role that won accolades was her portrayal on screen of Philomena, an Irish woman who had her child taken away from her by nuns in the 1950s. Dame Judi says that she would have found it difficult to forgive the Roman Catholic Church. “But she was a really remarkable person. If I’d seen the script without having met her, I don’t think I’d have made her so resilient and comic. But she was very, very funny, despite all she had gone through, and a woman of profound faith. She had the most remarkable spirit, and was somehow able to forgive them.”

Last month, Dame Judi was given an Olivier Award for her portrayal of Paulina in Kenneth Branagh’s *The Winter’s Tale* — another strong woman, whom she describes as “really quite rude to Leontes”. The award meant that she lost a bet with her 18-year-old grandson Sam.

“It’s rather a terrible admission, but my grandson said: ‘I’ll say one thing, Ma. You’ve taught me how to open a bottle of champagne, and how to put a bet on a horse.’ And, yes, we did have a bet about *The Winter’s Tale*, and he won.”

The exhibition “Shakespeare 400: History, Heritage & Faith” runs until the end of June. A number of associated events run alongside the exhibition, including theatre performances, film screenings, concerts, and talks. For more information visit www.stmaryswarwick.org.uk.