



RETURN OF THE JUDI
Dench comes back to Broadway for the first time in nearly 40 years—and picks up a Tony nomination.

Notre Dame

She's played a pair of queens and now reigns supreme on Broadway: Forty years after her last NYC appearance, Dame Judi Dench dreams of thrashing critics, admonishing audiences—and finishing in a four-way tie for a Tony

BY ERIK JACKSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC OGDEN

Dame Judi Dench is showing off her current embroidery project, a small square of material that eventually will be made into a pillow. After studying it for several moments, I notice the phrase *fuck off* subtly woven throughout the delicate, half-completed border. And Dench lets out a lusty, whiskey-voiced laugh.

In a few hours, Dench will step onstage for another performance of *Amy's View*, her first Broadway gig in nearly 40 years. She's earned a Tony nomination for her portrayal of the troubled actress Esme Allen, but curled up on a couch in what was once Marlon Brando's dressing room at the Barrymore Theatre, Dench doesn't display one iota of the character's ferocious hauteur.

She wasn't quite so jolly last year when the British tabloids mercilessly covered a family scandal. (Daughter Pinty had been estranged from her parents and kept her pregnancy a secret from them until two weeks before her son's birth.) But while Dench's personal life has now been picked apart, her work rarely has. Arguably England's greatest living actress, she's played everyone from Lady Macbeth to *Cabaret's* Sally Bowles on the British stage. Still, Americans only got to know the mischievous, apple-cheeked 64-year-old grandmother when she portrayed a pair of unforgettable screen queens: In 1997's *Mrs. Brown*, Dench delivered a heartbreaking, multilayered Victoria and was rewarded with a Golden Globe award and an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress. Last year, her riveting eight-minute turn as Elizabeth in *Shakespeare in Love* netted her the Best Supporting Actress Oscar. Dench can currently be seen—almost as briefly, she complains—in Franco Zeffirelli's *Tea with Mussolini*, and this November, she'll make her third appearance as the steely M in the Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*.

But for now, Dench is delighted to tread the boards of the Barrymore, where *Amy's View*

continues to play to packed houses. A Tony win seems imminent for the grand Dame, though in the event of an upset, she could always find a use for that fetching fuck-off pillow.

Time Out New York: How does it feel to have America finally fall in love with you, at this stage of your career?

Judi Dench: It is completely extraordinary. It is very, very, very heady. And it's dreamlike. Can't quite get a reality on it, you know?

TONY: Does it bother you to be stopped on the street?

JD: I don't mind at all. People are very nice. They don't delay you. I mean, they know you're going somewhere.

TONY: Well, New Yorkers have a reputation for being a little brusque.

JD: I've not met that at all. When Americans come to Britain, they must think we are appalling. I see the British reserve now. We must seem so uptight.

TONY: Are you uptight?

JD: Yes, I think so. But I don't feel reserved on the stage. I feel a kind of freedom about things. But as a person, I'm not good at walking into a room full of people. [*Gloomily*] I've got to speak to 330 people tonight after the show, a question-and-answer.

TONY: How do you feel about that?

JD: Well, you know, a bit of rising damp going on inside [*Chuckles*]. People think you're being so affected when you say you can't speak in public. They think, Go on, tell us another. You're an actress. But I'm sorry, that's not what it's about. You're too tired *not* to be yourself, because you've spent it all the evening before. It's nice just to be me—quietly—for the rest of the time.

TONY: When you were asked to play Cleopatra for Peter Hall in 1987, you described yourself as "a menopausal dwarf." How do you view yourself today?

JD: I just see myself as having to lose a lot of weight; it's a constant battle. I don't like watching myself on-screen or anything like

that. I just like trying to fool the public by coming onstage and making them think I'm another kind of person.... Tall, a tall person and narrower. But then, I *think* I am both those things—then I happen to catch myself in a mirror and think, God, I'm not that tall!

TONY: You're often spoken of in very sensual terms, yet you're not a typical bombshell.

JD: Not a typical bombshell? [*Laughs*] You know, it's a bit like what Hitchcock said—that thing about his heroines? That they looked very cool and icy, when in fact they were kind of fires underneath, burning fires. It's rather good, that.

TONY: So you've got some fires in there?

JD: I expect there are a few fires, yes. I don't know—I'm on the inside looking out. A woman recently sent me a letter before the show, and it said, "I'm on row A, and I look exactly like you." So, of course, I was... [*Mimes peering at the audience*]. Afterward, she met me and asked, "What do you think?" I said, "Well, I..." I was appalled! So I said, "I don't know, because I'm on the inside looking out, aren't I?"

TONY: Can you actually see members of the audience during the show?

JD: I can only pinpoint people who are coughing, people who sneeze—I can tell you where every single one of those people is. Yesterday, it was appalling, just appalling. Sometimes, I just want to stop and say, "Look, shall we all have a big cough? Let's all have a big cough together, and really get the phlegm up, and then let's stop."

TONY: What would a Tony win mean to you?

JD: Greed.

TONY: Why greed?

JD: Well, I think it would be... Ugh, I'm not prepared. I'm up against Zoë [*Wanamaker*, from *Electra*], who's a great friend of mine. And I believe that her performance has won it—oh, I don't want *anybody* to win.

TONY: But someone has to.

JD: I know, but I've already got an Oscar.

TONY: What went through your head when you won that?



amazing collection of strong British actresses. Did you all get along?

JD: Oh, hugely. We became like the Scorpion—the women in the film. There was a lot of going back and having a whole bottle of *prosecco*. Then we'd sit up and play *Scrabble*.

TONY: Did you get along with Cher?

JD: She said she was very frightened of us [Pauses]. We were frightened a little *more* of her. But we all got on perfectly well.

TONY: You've said that fear is the "petrol" that drives you.

JD: Fear produces incredible adrenaline, and adrenaline is what you need to get on and do it.

TONY: Do you still feel fear before performing?

JD: I do, every single time. That's essential.

TONY: How did it come into play with *Amy's View*?

JD: I asked Richard Eyre to let me out of the show. I could not learn the part. I was in a terrible state—absolutely in floods of tears. I said, "Richard, I really, *really* mean this. Please take it away from me." He said, "Are you losing your memory?" He gave me such a fright. I went home and thought, It's not Alzheimer's—it doesn't happen like *that*, does it?

TONY: Why was the role so hard?

JD: David [Hare] is difficult to learn. There's a marvelous rhythm about it, once you have got it. For example: "What a..." [Pause] "What a..."

TONY: Oh, God, I've jinxed you.

JD: Well, I know it's three syllables. I know the meter of it, but I can't think of what the word is. "What a"—something—"cliché." I have to get this [Looks at script]. "What a *meaningless cliché!*" There it is.

"I asked [director] Richard Eyre to let me out of *Amy's View*. I could not learn the part. He said, "Are you losing your memory?" He gave me such a fright. I thought, It's not Alzheimer's—it doesn't happen like *that*, does it?"



LADY PLUCK Dame Judi Dench and Joan Plowright take *Tea with Mussolini*, left; Dench and Samantha Bond play a mother and daughter who grow apart in *Amy's View*.

JD: My husband, Michael, squeezed my arm just beforehand, and he said, "Jude, you've got it." He said he knew from the look on Robin Williams's face. I remember kissing Michael, and I saw Robin Williams curtsy. I don't remember speaking, but I do remember then meeting James Coburn and thinking how tall he was. And I remember somebody saying to me, "Why aren't you wearing diamonds?"

TONY: Did you have a response?

JD: I said, "I'm not a diamonds sort of person." But I am now. [Touches a diamond-drop necklace, a gift from *Amy's View* costar Tate Donovan]

TONY: What changed you?

JD: Tiffany's.

TONY: Has winning the Oscar increased your price?

JD: I suppose that is what it has done—if I make another film.

TONY: If?

JD: Well, I'm on the cutting-room floor in *Tea with Mussolini*! That irritates me. Not because I don't trust Franco's judgment, but because that's what I find so imperfect about filming. I can control what I do tonight, but I've no control at all over films. It's deeply frustrating.

TONY: *Tea with Mussolini* features such an

TONY: If you don't remember it onstage tonight, I'll be receiving a fuck-off pillow.

JD: A fuck-you pillow! [Laughs]

TONY: Has your run-in with the British tabloids over Finty's pregnancy changed your relationship with the press?

JD: Yes, because now I'm not prepared really to talk about my private life. We have this divine boy in our family, and it's just heaven, and I don't want to talk about it to anybody.

TONY: Is it true that you once threatened to deck a critic?

JD: He compared Finty's acting to mine in his review, and I checked up with another critic who said that that's simply not allowed. I said I would black his eye, yes.

TONY: Are you sick of the Dame puns?

JD: Oh, they don't bother me. My dresser introduced me as a Dame to her friend, and he said [in a New York accent], "You mean, as opposed to a *broad*?" I like that.

TONY: Then, would you rather have the title Broad Judi Dench?

JD: [Puts her hands on her hips, feigning offense] No, I wouldn't want that! But I would like the title Tall Judi Dench.

Amy's View is at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. For tickets and information, call 239-6200.