

Actress Juliet Stevenson reveals that her toughest role is being an older mother

The star of *Truly, Madly, Deeply* on juggling family life and her new role in *Motherland*

You would be forgiven for thinking that Juliet Stevenson, one of the finest actresses of her generation, does only serious drama. Today she appears with Rosalind, her 13-year-old daughter, in *Motherland* at the Young Vic, giving voice to refugee women and children held in Yarl's Wood, in Bedfordshire, the UK's largest immigration detention centre. And she has just appeared in the BBC Two series *10 Days to War* as Elizabeth Wilmshurst, the Foreign Office's deputy legal adviser who resigned just before the invasion of Iraq.

But there are clearly two sides to Stevenson. On the one hand there is the highly principled woman whose charitable work has focused on victims of torture since she won a Laurence Olivier award 16 years ago for her role as a former political prisoner in *Death and the Maiden*, and who declined the invitation to the Palace to accept her CBE. Then there is the actress who won the nation's heart in *Truly Madly Deeply* - a romcom, albeit a sad one - and who loves great clothes and shopping with her daughter.

When we meet in Highgate, near her North London home, her lighter side is definitely winning. I expected the 51-year-old to put up barriers of polite reserve, but she is warm, empathetic - a quality she sets great store by - and frank about being an older mother, her stage nerves and insomnia, and her brother's death seven years ago. She happily owns up to the contradictions in her make-up: she is an atheist, yet superstitious and deeply spiritual. And she was a committed vegetarian for years until pregnancy cravings forced her to give up.

She orders a hot chocolate, declaring "I'm only pretending to be grown up, I'm not at all really," and a mixed salad, an unusually healthy choice for a woman who takes little care of herself. One minute she's pondering her answers and peering inquisitively around the café, the next she's doing a wicked impression of Joan Crawford.

When her children were born (Rosalind and Gabriel, 7), Stevenson decided to work much less, but she says that she still feels torn several times a week. "There are lots of things I can't do because it wouldn't be fair on the children. At the moment I'm agonising about a gorgeous offer to go to New York to do a play on Broadway. Rosalind would love to come, but she says 'what about my coursework and my friends?' I can't do that to her, it's not fair. But I wouldn't have it any other way; the children are my first priority in life."

Trying to combine motherhood with acting has become even harder as the children have become less easy to "lug around", although last autumn she took Gabriel to Budapest to make her latest film, *The Secret of Moonacre*, due to be released later this year. But she made sure that she saw Rosalind every few days, although she says that it involved a "ridiculously elaborate and expensive jigsaw of childcare" and racing to the airport to

catch the last flight home.

Life has become even more complicated since her partner Hugh Brody, the writer and anthropologist, accepted an academic post in Vancouver, which means that she is a single parent for about four months a year. The family muddles along, with a few hours help every day from an au pair. But Stevenson admits it is hard being on her own. “There are times when I think I'm not managing, like when we've all got head lice and I think, when am I going to find time to deal with that?”

'I'm more patient than I used to be'

She clearly has been earthed by her relationship with Brody, who she met in 1993, and by their children. Brody, who is 13 years her senior, also has two sons, Jonah, 21, and Tomo, 25, who still lives with them.

Stevenson admits that she is infinitely more patient and less judgmental than she used to be, despite the magnet on the fridge which reads: “I'm having my period and, therefore, can legally kill you.”

The couple used to argue a lot about food: for years she was a passionate vegetarian; he is a carnivore. Then she became pregnant. “I had bad morning sickness and craved chicken broth and lean meat. It was so embarrassing. I had a massive climbdown, much to Hugh's delight!”

Brody is the one who makes sure that she eats; she often forgets when he's away, and then wonders why she's grumpy. It's not surprising she's so thin, despite having no time to exercise - apart from running from the car to the school gate.

She lost a lot of weight after Gabriel's birth, and wishes that she wasn't so “gaunt”. She describes growing older as “like a long, slow, gradual bereavement. Not that I was ever Michelle Pfeiffer, but it's very unfair that what defines men's self-image is something very other than the elasticity of their skin.”

It only occasionally crosses her mind that she is the oldest mum in Gabriel's class. “I suppose I'm anticipating the day when he turns around and says, ‘actually, can you not collect me in case they think you're my granny’. Life is exhausting, but I haven't noticed a huge drop in energy yet.”

At times she is a terrible insomniac, and if she is going through a bad phase, Brody, who tends towards wakefulness himself, reads to her. Nothing much else helps, so when he's not around she gets out a book and, in extremis, will reluctantly resort to a sleeping pill.

Since her early days at the Royal Shakespeare Company, where she played all the great classical roles, she has been plagued by stage nerves. Minutes before a performance of *Motherland* last Mothering Sunday, she was quaking in the dressing room, and it took Harriet Walter, her good friend and fellow actress, to talk her out of it. At other times she draws on her own method of coping, which involves deep breathing and imagination.

“My version of meditation is to take myself internally back to what it was that inspired me to do this thing, and let that be what powers me on to a stage.” Formal meditation, yoga and Pilates are top of her “things to do later” list.

She tries hard to avoid pills, either to help her sleep or for anything else. “I think we are over-pilled. I don't take antibiotics if I can possibly help it and I always drink water before resorting to paracetamol. To me the problem with mainstream medicine is that it doesn't make connections between the physical and the psychological or the spiritual and emotional, yet it's so screamingly evident.”

Her dissatisfaction came to a head five years ago, when Gabriel was due for his MMR jab. Her leading role in a television drama about

Dr Andrew Wakefield's research into the possible risks of the triple vaccine echoed her own concerns and she took Gabriel for single injections at a private clinic in Hertfordshire. It was later closed because the immunisations had not been properly administered and she eventually found an NHS doctor in London willing to repeat the injections separately.

Her frustration with mainstream medicine has not made her go down the complementary route, apart from acupuncture, which she has tried a couple of times for stress and giving up smoking (it didn't work, so she relied on willpower) and cranial osteopathy, which helped with back problems when she was pregnant.

She was drawn to cranial osteopathy because of its links to the Alexander Technique, which she practised at the RSC and at the National Theatre. She regrets having no time for classes now, but, like riding a bike, “it stays with you. It is miraculous. If I'm exhausted at the end of the day, running up the Tube steps carrying loads of things, I just think of the Alexander principles. I imagine a length of invisible elastic coming out of the top of my head, drawing

me up, and the tension drops away and I no longer feel exhausted. I'm in danger of sounding New Agey, which I'm not, but thought allows you to redirect your energy and not waste it.”

'I'm hugely superstitious; odd for an atheist'

She is equally careful about finding the right words when she talks about her much-loved older brother, who died in a car accident just before her son was born. “Sometimes I have a sense of him with me. I don't think he is sitting in the back seat of the car with me or anything; in fact, it sounds too silly to be able to articulate. But I think there are many things we don't begin to understand yet.

“I'm hugely superstitious, which is an odd thing for an atheist to be. I routinely wouldn't walk under a ladder and I'm superstitious about talking about the future. I was taken to church regularly as a child and when things have been very hard in my life I've really wished I could pray. But I don't need religion to have a profound spiritual life.”

Stevenson looks to her mother for her parenting skills. When her children were younger and she took them with her wherever she went, it seemed that she had almost reproduced her peripatetic childhood as the daughter of a brigadier, moving to a new country every few years. The big difference is that at 9 she was sent to Hurst Lodge in Berkshire, the same boarding school that the Duchess of York attended. She loved the school but was horribly homesick. It is no surprise that she would never send her children away.

The areas where her mother can't lead by example, Facebook and games consoles, and the pressures on teenage girls, preoccupy her. The family's weekend bolt hole in Suffolk is a big help in counteracting the sophistication of North London life, but she still worries. "I feel strongly about children not being pushed to grow up earlier than they need to. I want to hold them, not back, but where they are. I don't like them watching things that are too difficult or too scary before they're ready.

"And I think the culture that pitches itself at teenage girls, which allows magazines for young teens that feature sexual positions and says the only way to look is like Kate Moss, is diabolical. But I'm learning that you can't fight the culture, you have to work within it. So rather than prohibit things I try to help them to develop a strong internal compass so they are able to make up their own minds."

There are two performances of Motherland at the Young Vic today; www.youngvic.org.

10 Days to War is on BBC Two, every week night at 10.30, until Wednesday

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/article1718718.ece>