

Imelda Staunton on acting naturally

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Interviewing Imelda Staunton is a disconcerting experience. Her wiry little dog, Molly, fixes me with the same penetrating gaze as her mistress. Is Molly fully grown, I inquire. "Yes, and so am I!" comes the brisk reply.

This is classic Staunton: sharp, witty and down to earth, especially when it comes to her appearance. "Fortunately my career has never been about how I look, it's about how I can be," she says. And indeed, she scrubs up a treat on the Oscar carpet, but on screen she can look a fright. As the gossipy Miss Pole in BBC One's highly acclaimed Cranford she is all raw cheeks and bonnet, while as the homely abortionist Vera Drake she ages about 100 years overnight. At the other extreme, she steals the show in the last Harry Potter movie as the fastidiously overdressed baddie Dolores Umbridge.

We meet at Staunton's home in West Hampstead, northwest London, to discuss her fronting of the British Heart Foundation's campaign to raise £1.5million this month for research. She lives with her husband Jim Carter, the craggy character actor, and daughter Bessie, 14, who both had parts in Cranford too (he played Captain Brown; she played Francesca Annis's servant).

One can immediately see why Mike Leigh, who directed Staunton in Vera Drake, described her as "a tough cookie": she is compact, fiercely focused and self-contained. Perched on the coffee table in a crisp linen shirt, jeans and eccentric stumpy shoes you would be hard-pressed to guess that she is 51 - and happily confronting the menopause without HRT. She craves balance in her life and finds it through acupuncture, yoga and gardening, while a "slight belief" in karma has replaced the Roman Catholicism of her upbringing.

Her mother died suddenly during surgery

"Bubbly" Imelda Staunton is only the half of it, she says. She always has had a melancholy side, suffered postnatal depression after Bessie's birth and has thought hard about the advantages and disadvantages of being an only child. She is still recovering from the shock of her mother's sudden death at 70 during heart bypass surgery three years ago.

Staunton has good reason to front the Help a Heart campaign. Both her parents, who moved to London from Ireland before she was born, suffered from heart disease. Staunton's father, a building worker, had bypass surgery 15 years ago, and she had no reason to think that her mother, whose hardening of the arteries and late-onset diabetes was diagnosed in her mid-sixties, would not survive surgery. "Mum was getting very slow and, when she was going for her bypass, I thought 'marvellous, that'll do it'," she

recalls. “They operated for what seemed like a day and a half and discovered that all the tissue around her heart was much more diseased than they had imagined. She never came out of the operation, which was a great shock. But I’m grateful that I didn’t have to watch her being very ill because she was feisty and would have hated it.

“Her death has had a huge effect on me. It felt like a big hole appeared on my left side - apparently your left side is your mother - which I thought could never be filled. Now I think what you have to do is fill it with yourself because your mother is part of you. I’m easing into that space, using it and being comforted by it.”

Her parents’ heart disease has prompted her to keep a close eye on her own health. She has regular blood sugar and cholesterol checks and listens carefully to her body: coffee and wine have started to make her feel a bit down so she avoids them. She loves meat, but became a vegetarian for more than 20 years after watching *The Animals Film*, the seminal documentary narrated by Julie Christie, in 1982. She has recently started eating meat again now that it is easier to discover its provenance.

Staunton has practised yoga on and off for about 15 years and walks for a good hour every day since Molly arrived as a puppy 18 months ago. She senses an uncanny link between the little terrier and her late mother. “The rescue home where we got Molly told us she had come from Ireland, which was weird, because my mum was Irish, and it was near the anniversary of her death. I thought, right, she’s coming home! Part of me thinks Molly is keeping me well, and is that my mum keeping me well? I do think about things like that.

She rejected Catholicism when she was 14

This seems a strange admission from someone who seems so grounded, and who has had “a problem with religion per se” since rejecting Catholicism at about 14. “I don’t feel the need for religion,” she says, “But I went on a yoga retreat last year and I do believe slightly in the karma thing and just being good and true unto yourself. And I slightly believe that you can attract good and bad to you. Chaotic people often have chaotic lives, and I think they create that. But if you try and have an inner peace and a positive attitude, I think you attract that.”

Staunton believes her ability as an actress may be to do with being an only child, reliant on her imagination for entertainment while both her parents worked. The family lived above her mother’s hairdressing salon in Archway, North London, and Staunton went to a local convent school, where an inspirational drama teacher encouraged her to apply to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

She originally thought she would have more than one child herself, but found being an older parent pretty exhausting. Plus there was the postnatal depression. “When Bessie was about 2 I remember thinking, we’ve got one bloody lovely daughter, so let’s not worry about it or think what it will do to her.

“Bessie’s only childhood is much more sociable than mine: there are sleepovers every

weekend and her mates are up the road. I remember Sundays as a child being terribly depressing. I used to go to my grandmother's in Highbury every weekend and, oh, that feeling after lunch...everything seemed dull and grey."

But her childhood was not all gloom: her mother, Bridie, played the fiddle and accordion, and passed her ear for a tune on to her daughter and granddaughter. One of Staunton's first big breaks was as Miss Adelaide in the National Theatre's legendary production of the musical *Guys and Dolls* in 1982, where she met Jim. They celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary in October. Neither is much good at doing nothing, but they get huge pleasure out of gardening; he is chief gardener, while she is his "barking assistant". Both front and back gardens are wonderfully wild, yet ordered.

When the couple married they made a decision not to spend long periods apart, which was set in concrete after Bessie's birth. This inevitably has meant turning down parts, but Staunton insists that it wasn't difficult because it was her choice.

"Having a child makes you strong and gives you chutzpah. It relaxed my attitude to the job; my centre of focus shifted, which I think is very helpful, because even if you're not a very indulgent actor you spend a lot of time thinking about yourself. I don't think that is particularly healthy." She says she rarely gets stressed: "I very quietly keep all my worry to myself. That's probably to do with being an only child."

Despite three Olivier awards, a Bafta, an Oscar nomination, an OBE and a "quiet inner confidence", Staunton is sometimes prone to insecurity. She describes her reaction to the last script she was sent. "I thought, they'll never want me for this. And even when they gave me the part, I thought I shouldn't be playing this, they should get someone else. Then I think, 'come on, you know you can do it'. And that's good for me. It's good for an actor to be frightened; to not take things for granted."

"Sadness enriches you. I use it in my work"

She thinks that her melancholy side - brief interludes of sadness rather than depression - also may be to do with being an only child, or perhaps her Irish ancestry. She has never considered therapy because she accepts it as part of life. "I haven't fully understood it; it might just be a different side of me, and as you get older you get sad about leaving things. A lot of me is very up, and you have to have light and shade. They are both important and you have to be able to balance them. You have to admit that sadness is part of you and that it enriches you. I use it in my work."

Staunton relies on regular acupuncture to achieve the equilibrium she craves, both in balancing the different aspects of her personality and in dealing with the sudden shifts of gear that are a successful actor's lot. It seems likely that acupuncture has also helped her to navigate the menopause without hot sweats or any other symptoms apart from tiredness. She takes herbal supplements to support her liver and adrenals (good for energy), magnesium, iron and vitamin C. And if she is exhausted, she goes to bed for an hour. "People now are obsessed with keeping going, everything's got to be go, go, go," she says. "I think this is the stage my body is going through and I'm going to help it as

much as I can.”

Staunton hopes that she will never have to retire and suggests that actors tend to be healthy because they're so used to dealing with the unexpected.

She recently finished filming *A Bunch of Amateurs*, a comedy with Burt Reynolds and Derek Jacobi, due out next year. “What’s great is that actors often go on until their eighties,” she says. “Phyllida Law, my neighbour, is seventysomething. I saw her running up the road the other day and I thought, that’s what I want; to stay active. I want a healthy old age.”

Imelda Staunton is supporting the British Heart Foundation’s Help a Heart campaign this month. Log on to bhf.org.uk/helpaheart or phone 0845 2410976

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/health/article1963156.ece>