



Garry O'Connor

A star lost in his darkness

Donald Spoto, the prolific American showbiz biographer, caused outrage some years ago when claiming, without a shred of evidence, that Laurence Olivier had enjoyed a ten-year affair with Danny Kaye, and that Joan Plowright, Olivier's third wife, had stopped him writing about his gay sexuality in his autobiography. In another book published in 1995, 'exposing' the Windsor dynasty, Spoto predicted that the Royal family would not last long.

We might expect a similar, provocative take on the Redgraves. Spoto casts his net wide, over Sir Michael, his long-suffering wife, his brood – Vanessa, Corin and Lynn – and their spouses and offspring.

Perhaps inevitably, Michael holds centre stage from the start as Spoto

The Redgraves: A Family Epic

by Donald Spoto

Robson £25 inc p&p

★★★★★

explores his antecedents: his mother, a feisty actress; her gambling first husband; and the rich stepfather who fostered Michael's precocious gifts at Clifton College and Cambridge. In his diary, Michael confessed early to same-sex passions, and what was to become an unshakable guilt about sex.

He met his wife, the actress Rachel Kempson, at the start of their careers. Romantic and insecure, Rachel had a tendency to fall for gay actors, and as Michael towered above all others, she

asked him to marry her. Despite his unrestrained passion for men, Michael still wanted to be a father and have a family, and Rachel turned a blind eye to his escapades, only in time rebelling with an affair of her own.

A heavy drinker, Michael took a string of lovers, including a Coldstream Guardsman, theatrical assistants, young directors and actors. The story goes that Noel Coward, briefly a paramour, was strolling one day with a friend in Leicester Square when he spotted the huge Odeon sign: Dirk Bogarde and Michael Redgrave in *The Sea Shall Not Have Them*. 'I don't see why not,' he quipped, 'everyone else has.'

Many of Michael's lovers ended up fleecing him, increasing the financial pressures on his wife and family. By his late 60s, claims Spoto, Michael was so broke he had to ask for money from the King George's Pension Fund for Actors.

His theatrical career had been fading since his mid-50s. By 1963, playing Claudius to Peter O'Toole's critically disastrous *Hamlet* in the first production at Olivier's new National Theatre, his memory was going, not from drink as everyone suspected, but from Parkinson's disease.

Cold and aloof, he nonetheless remained loving towards his wife and family to the end. His first love, however, was always the stage. 'For the real actor,' he once said, 'the only place where he is truly at home is on stage... He is only at home when he is not himself.'

The other Redgraves enjoy weaker supporting roles in Spoto's book. Corin, as intellectually brilliant as his father, but with inhibited talent as an actor, only really comes into his own after his father's death in 1985; then, as his acting career peaks, he succumbs to illness and early death.

Lynn has deep troubles, too, enduring bankruptcy and then dying from cancer. Only Vanessa, who marries and divorces bisexual Tony Richardson, transcends what might be called the family curse to realise fully her gift.

Family biographies are tricky, and jumping from one Redgrave to another in chronological procession, we tend to sink into a scissors-and-paste land of setbacks and triumphs. Furthermore, Spoto is sometimes inaccurate, as when, for



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'FAMILY CURSE': Sir Michael Redgrave and his wife, Rachel, in the Forties

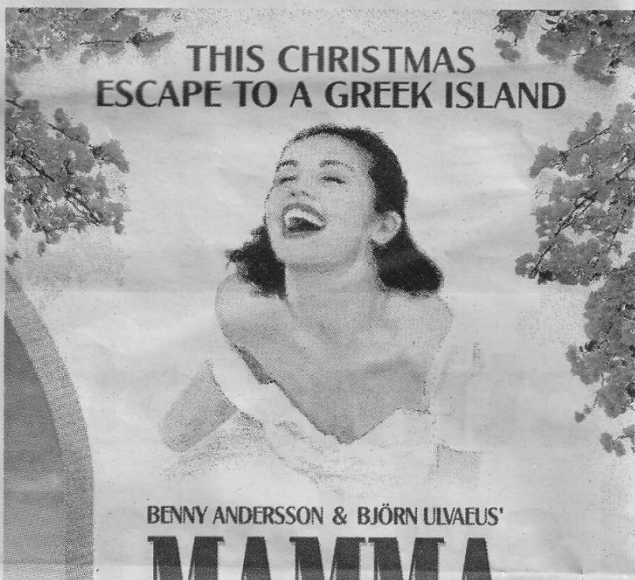
example, he says Olivier 'took off' Peter O'Toole's *Hamlet* after just nine weeks: in fact, it was a sell-out but O'Toole, already contracted to make *Lord Jim*, could play only 28 performances. And the description of 'Dadie' George Rylands, the legendary King's College don, as a 'repressed homosexual and a heavy tippler', is unfounded and unfair.

But generally, Spoto renounces his usual wild speculation for a more sober and sombre account. The story he tells is a strangely moving pilgrimage of self-inflicted tortures.

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