



**This
Much
is True**

**Miriam
Margolyes**

'There is no-one on earth quite so wonderful'

STEPHEN FRY

BAFTA-winning actor, voice of everything from *Monkey* to the Cadbury's Caramel Rabbit, creator of a myriad of unforgettable characters from Lady Whiteadder to Professor Sprout, MIRIAM MARGOLYES, OBE, is the nation's favourite (and naughtiest) treasure. Now, at the age of 80, she has finally decided to tell her extraordinary life story - and it's well worth the wait.

Find out how being conceived in an air-raid gave her curly hair; what pranks led to her being known as the naughtiest girl Oxford High School ever had; how she ended up posing nude for Augustus John as a teenager; why Bob Monkhouse was the best (male) kiss she's ever had; and what happened next after Warren Beatty asked 'Do you fuck?'

From declaring her love to Vanessa Redgrave to being told to be quiet by the Queen, this book is packed with brilliant, hilarious stories. With a cast list stretching from Scorsese to Streisand, a cross-dressing Leonardo di Caprio to Isaiah Berlin, *This Much Is True* is as warm and honest, as full of life and surprises, as its inimitable author.

**This
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Is True**

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Introduction

Suddenly I am eighty. How can that possibly be? Eighty is OLD! Eighty means maybe five, maybe ten years left. Where did my life go? There's so much I still want to do. So, what have I learnt? Have I done the best I could? Have I made a difference? Those are the questions that rush at me.

I am writing this book in an attempt to make sense of my life, to take stock. It's been a full, if chaotic, eighty years. I was born in 1941 at the darkest moment of the war; my parents were convinced that Britain was about to lose. Despite this, the Holocaust and its horrors didn't really impinge on my childhood; it's only later I've come to realise how powerfully and inescapably that shadow has become part of my life.

Growing up in the post-war period, with loving parents, I skipped from moment to moment. I've travelled through every continent bar Antarctica, I've slept with a curious variety of humans. I entered a precarious profession where a short, fat, Jewish girl with no neck dared to think she could stand on a stage and be successful. I've completed over five hundred jobs and relished every minute of them. But have I merely skimmed the surface? Why do I still feel so unsure about things? Might a certain level of uncertainty be a good thing? Complete confidence carries smugness alongside – and I do *not* want that. Smugness shows on stage; when you can see a performer admiring their delivery of a certain line, it kills the performance

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stone dead. It's possible that my insecurity is the very quality that connects me to everyone else. I don't hide my vulnerability. I don't know how.

From the beginnings of my coherent existence, a common thread has been the ease with which I could connect with others. Latterly I've found the joy of using that gift to make documentaries and *listen* to others, rather than talking myself.

I'm quite sure you picked this book up hoping I'd make you laugh. That's what I seem to have become best known for. I lack the filter others possess and out of my potty mouth pop filthy sexual anecdotes, verbal and physical flatulence on a grand scale. I swear, I fart, I draw attention to things best left unremarked – and it seems it's made me popular. Please don't think I'm unaware of my duty to both entertain and shock you, but I won't allow my book to be just dirty talk. Let me tell you the truth about myself, too.

When asked, I said I had never made an attempt to write anything down before. This is not entirely true: when I was nine, in 1950, I wrote my autobiography in a large, blue book without lines. I wish I could find it, but in one of the many moves of my life, that youthful testament disappeared. Since then, I have simply lived my life to its fullest – until 2020 trapped me in Tuscany for eight months and I finally had the time to write it. With help from my loyal friends, many of whom have known me for most of that life, I've been piecing things together and teasing out memories from the deepest recesses of my mind. It's been a fascinating process.

My partner of fifty-three years, Heather, finds such spilling out of all one's deepest, most personal thoughts and fears, excruciating. She said: 'Now, don't let this book be like one of your Graham Norton

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interviews where all you do is talk smut – it's got to be about things that matter, Miriam.' Heather is a serious person.

Well, I can't please everyone all the time. But I honour the Truth. And within these pages, you will only find Truth, or at least *my* Truth. There will be some smut inevitably, and it might be a bumpy ride, but I promise you the REAL Miriam Margolyes.

Oh, Miriam!

At school, I wore my hair in great glossy bunches on either side of my head, and I was *naughty*. My hair was naughty, too. For the whole of my life, my hair has caused comment – sometimes envy, sometimes revulsion. Mummy used olive oil to try and tame it. It certainly gave it a shine, but it could have imparted an odour. I remember in the third form, Valerie Scott said loudly, ‘Your hair smells.’ I punched her to the ground and she had to go to hospital. Thankfully, she’s still a valued chum.

I answered back in lessons. Miss Willetts came in and said briskly, ‘Right!’ so I said loudly and immediately, ‘Left!’ I was sent out for that. Most teachers got used to it, and my classmates egged me on to do the things they might not have dared to do themselves.

In the upper fifth, I decided to stage a ‘dare.’ I pretended to faint in the playground. It was a fine day, during our fifteen-minute morning break, after which everyone went back up to the form rooms. But not me. As I collapsed onto the asphalt and lay flat on my back, I could see my form-mates above, peering out of the windows, giggling, wanting to see the results of my ‘faint’. There was a pause while teachers were summoned. Miss Jackson, the maths teacher, arrived: ‘Get up, get up, Miriam!’ Then she kicked me and said, ‘Oh, she’s just shamming.’ Miss Jackson, who was an extremely nice woman apart from The Kick, was one of the teachers you remember. She was very tall, straight up & down, no chest or hips to speak of, legs like tree

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trunks encased in very thick lisle stockings, & she always wore a light brown tweed suit

But I continued to lie there on the ground, eyes closed, in my pretend swoon. This went on so long that the teachers who had gathered started to get really worried. By the end of break, it seemed as if the whole school was standing at the windows, watching to see what would happen next. I lay still, occasionally moaning but, eventually, Miss Brown (biology – memorable for her extraordinary hair style: two sharply etched rolls on each side of her otherwise cropped head) who was wonderfully tender-hearted, came and said, ‘Come and lie down, Miriam.’ I had to lie down in the quiet room with a cup of hot water (I never drank tea and still don’t) until it was decided I had suffered no ill-effects and could return to the classroom. I was greeted with acclamation; and it seems everyone who was there remembers this jape.

Another time, in Miss Willett’s French class, I dressed up as a French lady who had come to inspect the school for her daughter. I borrowed Mummy’s best fur coat and her court shoes, and I tripped into the classroom, saying in a very thick French accent, ‘Oh, I’m zo veery sorry to interrupt everyzing. I am veery interested in how you teach ze French in ze school.’ I rolled my r’s in a pretty good approximation of a French accent. The whole class was writhing with laughter and even Miss Willetts tried not to smile as she said, ‘Come along, Miriam, you’re wasting time.’ To which I replied, ‘Oh, zo you do not vant me to stay? Well, zen, I will go.’ And with a flounce of Mummy’s fur coat, I stepped out into the hall (and into yet another detention).

On one frightful occasion, I saw a child bending over in the corridor in front of me and, of course, I rushed up to the presented bottom

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and gave it a resounding THWACK! The figure straightened up and, to my horror, I saw it was not a child but Miss Maddron (head of French). Miss Maddron was one of the special ones: she was tiny and slim, but carried herself very straight and wielded immediate and powerful authority. She wasn't much taller than the shortest child, but taught brilliantly and had everyone's undivided attention. The abject shock on my face was enough to clear me of any impertinence, and not a word was said as I fled up the corridor. I liked her tremendously; I wasn't very good at French, but I did try.

Later, just as I was leaving to go to university, Miss Maddron told me, 'You were naughty, Miriam, but you were never wicked.' I hope that is true, although I remember once in the lower third putting up my hand in the biology lesson and saying, in between hysterical giggles, to Miss Keay, our rather buttoned-up teacher: 'Please, Miss Keay, what are [snigger, snigger giggle] t-t-t testicles?' Of course, I knew what they were, but I just wanted to hear how she replied, which was, unsurprisingly: 'Miriam, don't be silly.'

The school prank I enjoyed most of all happened in gym class. We had been reading about the Greeks tricking the unsuspecting Trojans during the Trojan War and this had given me the idea for my own wooden horse episode. Our school vaulting horse was constructed in a pyramid shape in a series of wooden tiers, which you could remove or add to in order to make it lower or higher, with the padded suede-leather 'saddle' on the top for vaulting. My accomplices and I took the saddle off, I climbed in and the top was replaced, leaving me concealed and snug inside. By the time Miss Leonard, the gym teacher, came into the gym hall asking, 'Where's Miriam?' my classmates were already in paroxysms, which, of course, flummoxed the poor soul. I had a perfect

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view of the unfolding scene from my hiding place, through the grab holes in each of the wooden tiers. My chums could see my eyes darting about, but Miss Leonard didn't notice a thing – she had no idea I was in there. It was exquisite fun. I moved the horse just an inch or so. I could see that Miss Leonard was aware that it had moved, but didn't quite believe it. Every so often, I would shuffle the horse forward a little more, inch by inch, watching her increasing befuddlement at every movement. She couldn't work out what was happening.

Our lumbering game of Grandmother's Footsteps was one of my best bits of naughtiness. Miss Leonard did bear the brunt of a good deal of my more boisterous behaviour. I can still remember the weariness in her voice – despair tinged with resignation – as she reacted to my antics: 'Oh, Miriam! Oh, Miriam!' In fact, it was the usual response to most of my activities at school – 'Oh, Miriam. *Oh*, Miriam! Oh, *Miriam!*'

No other pupil would match me in my outrageousness until Tatty Katkov came to Oxford High School. I was always in detention. I *always* got caught. I remember when I was given a detention for a Thursday afternoon for some transgression or other, I was obliged to say truthfully, 'Oh, I'm sorry I can't do then, as I'm already booked for a detention on Thursday. But I could fit Friday in—?'

Nude Modelling for Augustus John

In May 1960, just a few days before I turned nineteen, I watched a television programme called *Face to Face*, in which a television journalist called John Freeman interviewed the octogenarian Welsh artist Augustus John.

The conversation with Augustus John was riveting because it was filmed at his home in Fordingbridge, Hampshire, in rooms chock-a-block with half-finished oil paintings and rough sketches, and huge rough-hewn sculpted busts. I was enthralled by him. He was a big man, good to look at – he had an untidy, bushy beard and bright, twinkling eyes. He would have been in his eighties then, but vigorous and naughty, and he had a mischief about him which I relished. He seemed the epitome of a great living artist.

I'd left school and was earning pocket money modelling for the students at the Ruskin School of Art. But Augustus John was clearly the real deal and suddenly I thought, 'Why don't I model for him?'

I found out the name of his house in Fordingbridge: Fryern Court. I don't know how I found his address; I probably looked it up in a phonebook or something, because that's how you found out about things then – and I wrote him a letter. I said that I was writing to suggest that I model for him, that I was seventeen, with experience in modelling, and it would be such an honour to pose for him, etc. etc.

A few days later, my mother received a phone call from Dorelia McNeill, Augustus's common-law wife and model for both Augustus

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and his sister, Gwen. You could tell within seconds (certainly Mummy could) from Dorelia's clipped, cut-glass tones that she was from the upper classes and someone with social status. I hadn't told my parents that I was going to write to him, because I didn't think that anything would come of it, but as it turned out Mummy was charmed by Dorelia; so charmed, that she didn't demur when the ground rules were firmly laid out: 'You know, I think my husband is doing a painting of some bathers, so it would have to be a nude portrait.'

I have never understood why my parents agreed to let me do it. I think Mummy must have found out that he was a very famous painter, because as I have said, she was quite the social climber and delighted by celebrities. Daddy might have disapproved but, ultimately, when he saw the determined females ranged against him, he gave way and he did as he was told.

I stipulated that my parents were to deliver me to the house in Fordingbridge and then they must go away and come back a couple of hours later to drive me back. That's what we did.

Beforehand, I practiced taking off my clothes quickly in my bedroom. I remember that I wore a blue and white polka dot dress, which had, as it were, easy access and I could get it on and off without fuss. I didn't wear stockings, just some socks and my sandals. So off we drove – it took over two hours to get there but when we arrived at his beautiful old house – a big country manor – my parents, at my request, dumped me on the doorstep and drove away.

I rang the doorbell. Nothing happened for about ten minutes, and I was beginning to get rather anxious, when suddenly from around the side of the house came a very strange, tiny old lady with fine, wispy, white-grey hair, wrapped in a Mexican blanket.

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She saw me and said, 'Oh, hello. Have you been waiting long?' She rang the doorbell again, and Augustus John came to the door and opened it. He was smoking a pipe, and he was tall and imposing with that full white beard and the shock of straggling snow-white hair I remembered from the television. He wore what I used to call dungarees – it was a boiler suit made out of denim – and he had a little, dark, flat cap like a beret on his head.

I said, 'Hello, I'm Miriam.'

Augustus John said, 'Oh, yes. Come in, come in!'

He seemed very well-to-do and commanding, with a great booming voice. The house was dark, messy and muddled. Dorelia insisted, 'We must have some tea before we start.' So, we three went into the kitchen. I sat down nervously and Dorelia said, 'Do you like bread and jam?' And I replied, 'Yes.' She carved me a couple of slices of brown bread and covered them with jam – and it was nice jam, homemade, although I was so anxious that I remember finding it hard to swallow. Then, and this is the thing I really remember – I noticed on the wall there was a painting of a woman sitting in a chair with her back to us. Augustus John said, 'Do you like that painting?' I said, 'Yes, I do, I do like it. Very much.' He said, 'Well, my sister Gwen painted that, and one day people will come to realise she was a much better painter than I am.' And he was right, I think they have. I will always remember him saying that.

He asked me if I knew how to play shove-ha'penny. I'd never heard of it and said so. He brought out a little board and taught me how to play it. I've never played it since. He asked a bit about me – what did I want to do, and what was I doing, but I can't truly remember much else of the conversation because I was so wonderstruck. I was very

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much in awe of this man who seemed to fill the landscape – he really was a big chap. Some people dwindle with age, but he didn't seem to: he was still immensely physical, and very present.

After this slightly awkward chat, Augustus said, 'Right, well, we'll take you into the studio now.' We went out of the house and into the studio, which was an extraordinary white modernist construction at the bottom of the garden, with two storeys and a strange, curved, snailshell-like staircase. His studio space was on the ground floor. It had a high ceiling, tall windows with clean, white upholstered window seats (where, I supposed, his models must have posed), and lots of dazzling light. Like the house, it was higgledy-piggledy and not at all tidy, .

Augustus said, 'I'm doing a study of bathers by the sea. You might as well take your clothes off now.' and so, without any curtain or anything, I speedily divested myself of my polka-dot dress. This was the moment I'd been waiting for; I was nervous but excited too, in a good way. I'd never stripped for anyone before, certainly not for a strange man. I wasn't wearing a bra. I wanted to keep everything simple. I took off my socks and shoes, then finally my knickers, and I stood there naked, feeling quite embarrassed, hoping my plumpness wouldn't put him off.

Augustus John looked at me, stroked his beard contemplatively, and said, 'Very nice. Very nice.' Then he said, 'Your skin takes the light.' I thought that was a very fine compliment; I treasure it still. Then he said, 'Good! Well, I think what I'd like you now to do is to climb that ladder.' And I thought, 'Blimey, I wasn't expecting that!'

I looked to where he'd indicated and there was a library ladder, which had steps and a pole you could hold on to. He wanted me to go

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up and down it. I walked over to the ladder and somewhat awkwardly I clambered up and down. All the while, Augustus John stroked his beard and stared at me. Then he started to draw. I suppose I was there for a couple of hours doing different poses – not all on the ladder. He didn't talk much when he was drawing as he was concentrating, but he was always very avuncular, like a humorous uncle, gentle and so sweet. It was a wonderful experience, a wonderful memory, and I cherish it, and one that I later recounted to Michael Holroyd, his biographer.

I remember little of the journey back. Of course, my parents were very interested to know if Mr John had behaved himself. And he had. I had nothing untoward to report on that front, because he'd comported himself quite impeccably. I'm not sure that I shouldn't be insulted that he didn't attempt at least a quick grope, or whether it was Dorelia's watchful eye that ruled out any unseemly advances, because I later discovered that Augustus John's insatiable sexual appetites had allegedly resulted in his fathering up to one hundred offspring. Supposedly, whenever he walked down the King's Road in Chelsea, he would pat any passing ragamuffin on the head 'in case it's one of mine'.

I wrote to him again afterwards, and very sweetly he wrote back and said that it had been very nice to meet me and that he'd like to do some more sketches. But shortly after that, in 1961, he died. I have those letters somewhere. And I never did see the drawings. I don't know what happened to them. They must be somewhere in his oeuvre.

I'm so glad I had the courage to do that. But possibly the thing that clinched the deal was that I said I would do it for free, because most people would have expected money in return. So, the lesson of this story is, I suppose, that it's sometimes worth taking off your clothes for nothing.

Adventures in Cinema

I'm not a film actress. Acting on film is completely different to acting for the stage. On stage, it's all about talent. In films it's luck. On stage, we actors have some measure of control, but on screen, the director calls the shots. You can act away for all you're worth; but if you're not in shot, forget it.

My first major film role was as Elephant Ethel, a prostitute at the Golden Grape whorehouse in *Stand Up, Virgin Soldiers* (1977). (I did say that I've played a lot of tarts in my career!) The film's tagline was: 'England expects every man to do his duty.' The women don't even get a mention . . .! It was quite fun being in this film because my make-up made me quite unrecognisable. It was a substantial if politically incorrect stab at becoming Chinese. Ninety minutes in make-up, fish-scales at the side of my eyes to drag them upwards into an Asiatic slant, very heavy red lips and two wigs, one on top of the other. Tits corralled under my chins and the tightest of revealing costumes. When I came on set, I was greeted with piercing wolf whistles and howls of desire from the crew. When I left in the studio car to return home, I was unheralded and ignored. No one had a clue who I was,

My first brush with Hollywood, though, wasn't until 1980 when I was called to audition for Warren Beatty for a small part as the secretary of the Communist Party. I didn't even have a line but it wasn't a bad role. The film was *Reds*, and it was about the life and career of John Reed, the American journalist and communist activist. Mr Beatty

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who, according to his biographer, has had sex with 12,775 women (a number he disputes), insisted that he could only meet me in his trailer at lunchtime. I knocked at the door, he said, 'Come in.' He then looked at me up, down, up, quite slowly and said, 'Do you fuck?' 'Yes, but not you,' I replied. 'Why is that?' he asked. 'Because I am a lesbian,' I said. He grinned and said, 'Can I watch?' I replied, 'Pull yourself together and get on with the interview.'

I rather regretted what I'd said afterwards. For one thing it wasn't accurate. We lesbians don't do anything as simplistic as 'fuck', and for another thing it brought me down to his level. But he was trying to intimidate me and I wasn't going to be intimidated. And it worked: I got the job. I'm pleased that I've met him and he's in my life – he is Hollywood royalty, after all – but Warren remains a naughty boy who needs a smack.

Reds was his obsession: he co-wrote, produced and directed, whilst also starring in it. He wanted to control every aspect of the film. During the making of the film, he would go around surprising people and filming them unawares. He would suddenly call out, 'Miriam!' and, as I turned around, startled, he would take a shot of me. He did it to everyone and they all hated it but only I was prepared to call him out on it: 'Warren, please. I don't like you doing that. We are actors; we should be able to simulate whatever it is that you want us to do.' He said, 'Well, I don't have time, and a lot of you can't do that.'

One thing I noticed: when on screen, he would mouth the lines of the other actor or actress acting alongside him. He had written the script, so of course he knew it all off by heart. I found it extremely distracting and irritating: 'Warren, in that scene, were you aware that you were mouthing the words of the other characters?' 'What do you

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mean?’ he snapped. ‘Well, you obviously know all the script and when the actors are speaking their lines, you’re saying them too; we can see that your lips are moving.’ He did *not* like me pointing that out at all. He looked at me with real rage and said between clenched teeth, ‘Thank you.’ No one else had had the balls to tell him and he was furious, but he knew it was true, so he accepted it from me though he clearly hated the fact that I’d shown him up. What a good thing I did; he’d have looked a right muffin if it had gone into cinemas like that.

I mooned at him once; he completely deserved it. I can’t remember why, but probably because he made Diane Keaton do fifty takes of a shot she did perfectly well the first time. Mooning is a powerful tool; a bottom is not threatening; it’s rude, amusing but unmistakable. Diane had refused his marriage proposal and he took it out on her. She was completely delightful, totally without grandeur and joined us ‘contract featured extras’ (that’s what the small parts were called) for supper one night, with friendliness and a sense of fun. She’s one of my top ‘faves’.

I was busy in 1989–1990, albeit in non-starring roles: I played a realtor (an estate agent) on *Pacific Heights*, a American yuppie psychological horror film directed by John Schlesinger, starring Melanie Griffith, Matthew Modine and Michael Keaton, shot in San Francisco and Palm Springs. In 1990, I was also, as said, a late replacement stand-in for Norma Aleandro in *I Love You To Death* and was delighted to fly back to London to work with Sands Films, Christine Edzard, Derek Jacobi and an amazing British cast on *The Fool*.

In 1991 I had fun with Demi Moore on *The Butcher’s Wife* (1991); I was thrilled when she shared with me the nugget that Bruce Willis farts in bed. Then I had the pleasure of working with Kenneth Branagh

and Emma Thompson in *Dead Again*, playing a mad medium. The film had a rocky start as the crew seemed to lack respect for Ken's directing and were noisy and uncooperative. It was his first foray into Hollywood and he was determined not to be messed about so, tightening his already thin lips, he sacked the lot of them. He meant business and wanted all to see that he was fully in charge. His shock tactic worked and the film was a success. Although my part was tiny, I was always treated with complete warmth and there was a real family atmosphere on set. Ken takes the work immensely seriously but loves camp jokes; referring to the male leads of his films as 'She' which is something Americans can find confusing.

We were far from the only Brits in Hollywood of course. In Henry Selick and Tim Burton's Disney production of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1996) wonderful Joanna Lumley and I played the orphan James's sadistic and tyrannical aunts, sisters Spiker and Sponge. Joanna was the beautiful, thin, nasty one with a vicious tongue, and I was the fat, vain one, who delights in admiring myself in the mirror. The film was a combination of stop-motion animation and live action scenes. Henry wasn't used to working with live actors, only with puppets and in animation. He was forever asking us to perform impossible tasks, like running *backwards* uphill. One particular stunt I remember was when he asked me to fall downstairs onto my back, and let a tarantula walk across my face. I said to Henry: 'Darling, I'll give you one shot at this.' I insisted on a stunt double to do the fall downstairs, and I spoke to the spider wrangler beforehand: 'Is he sedated?' I asked. 'Oh, yes,' said the wrangler. 'But the poison sac is intact, or he won't move.' I lay on my back, the tarantula was carefully placed on my forehead, and the cameras rolled. His little, cold feet

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walked slowly across my face. I gave Henry his one shot. He got it and it's in the film.

Another stunt Joanna and I did together was being winched 60 feet up, strapped back to back with ropes, standing on a tiny round manhole cover, being spun centrifugally in the air and drenched with water. Our stunt captain was called Rocky. He was a sweet guy; he knew we were scared and said, 'The minute you want to come down, just shout "Rocky" and I'll have you brought down carefully.' I think we lasted fifteen seconds, then we both screamed, 'ROCKEEEE!' at the tops of our voices. And down we came. Never again.

Less fun was working with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1999 supernatural thriller *End of Days*.^{*} What a pig of a man! Although he was relatively professional with me – because he didn't fancy me – he was awfully gropey with women he was interested in. He thought a lot of himself, but I wasn't surprised: he was a bodybuilder from Austria who had gone on to become a huge star.

In my whole acting career, this is the only fight I can remember – I was playing Mabel, Satan's sister, and I had to tussle with Arnold, a prospect I did not relish, but on the day he was professional – he taught me how to punch and scratch. My main and most lingering memory of being in that film, however, is of Schwarzenegger's bottom. My character was killed by having my throat sliced by a glass table at the end. The scene ended – and Schwarzenegger farted right in my face when I was down on the floor, trying not to move. It was such a

* Not surprisingly, *End of Days* was nominated for three Golden Raspberry Awards (Razzies) – Worst Actor, Supporting Actor and Director, but 'lost' to Adam Sandler (*Big Daddy*), Ahmed Best (*Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*) and Barry Sonnenfeld (*Wild Wild West*) respectively.

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noxious cloud I shouted, 'Fuck you, Arnie!' I think he did it because I'd farted on set and he felt a tit for tat was due.

Although Susan kept me busy working in all these movies, in film – then as now – I have to admit I lack screen technique. In fact, it wasn't until I worked with Annette Bening (Warren Beatty is very lucky to have ended up married to her) and Jeremy Irons on *Being Julia* (2004) that I began to get a glimmer of an insight into the art of acting for the camera. Jeremy Irons gave me some notes and rather than resenting it, 'Who the fuck do you think you are, telling me how to act? I just thought, 'Oh, please, yes! Thank you!''

I don't quite remember what Jeremy's exact words were, but it was about not doing too much too quickly, to reserve something different for each take. On set, you particularly shouldn't turn fast; for film work, you have to move more slowly so the camera can capture your movements and gestures. Another nugget was, 'Close-ups are everything. Always reserve your best stuff for the close-ups, because when the character is looking into the camera, or the camera is close, that's when your audience can see inside your soul, when they look into your eyes. And don't blink.' He encouraged me to think about my advantages and build on them. I have big, expressive eyes and my face mirrors a lot, it expresses what I feel, and that can be useful. I tend to do things to excess, so it was a valuable insight to realise that it's not a bad idea to rein it in, to save it for later. Jeremy gave me good advice – people are always more interesting if they're hiding something.

* He and Sinead own a castle in Cork. One day, I hope they'll invite me there. No harm in mentioning it.

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I would love to be enigmatic. It hasn't happened. My need for constant attention is the seat of the overacting. It is really saying, 'Me, me, me, me! Don't look at the others: look at me. I'm more interesting!'



Let me tell you about working with Streisand. The first time I met Barbra was in the early eighties when she was casting her 1983 movie *Yentl*, an adaptation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's story about a Jewish girl who pretended to be a boy in order to study the Talmud. She had spent over a decade trying to get this film made, eventually producing, co-writing (with Jack Rosenthal), directing and starring in the film herself, which went on to earn three Oscar nominations.

I had to go out to Wembley where she was holding the casting. Barbra is a prima donna, but she has a right to be, so I was fascinated and excited to have the chance of meeting and maybe working with her. My agent told me that I was being seen for the part of a village woman, so I thought about how I wanted to appear to Barbra at our meeting. I decided to look the part. I came dressed in the sort of clothes one might wear to do the housework*, and laden with two well-worn shopping bags.

I went into the casting room and there was this tiny little person sitting cross-legged on a sofa, a cap completely covering her hair so you saw just her luminous face. I plonked my shopping bags on the floor and then I sat down heavily, as if exhausted by life.

* My normal attire although I am allergic to housework.

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Barbra was extremely friendly. She said, 'How old are you?' I said 'forty-one.' At that she exclaimed, 'Oh, you're forty-one! *I'm* forty-one!' I looked at her and said, 'Well, fucking hell, you look fantastic for forty-one. How incredible!' I meant it, and she was quite pleased. Then she asked me what I'd been doing, so I told her about filming *Reds* with Warren Beatty. She asked what that had been like, and I said, 'Well, he's an absolute bastard.' I told her about our meeting in his trailer and the 'Do you fuck?' story. Barbra loved all that gossip. I liked her; she was a huge star even then but she was approachable and fun, and I got the part.

Yentl was primarily shot in the small town of Žatec (northwest of Prague), which filled in for rural Poland in the early twentieth century. It was the first American production that had been filmed in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in almost a decade and when the plane touched down, there was a mass of expectant fans thronging the airport to catch sight of Barbra Streisand. Barbra is shy and nervous; she didn't want to exit the plane with all those people there. She said to me, 'You go.' I said, 'What do you mean?' She said, 'You go out, Miriam.' I said, 'You think they want to see me? Come on, Barbra, they want *you!* You're the one they're waiting for. Now, go out there and be Barbra Streisand.'

And she did: she stood up, took a deep breath and then she visibly *became* Barbra Streisand, the world-famous actress and singer. Thus transformed, head held high and face beaming, she walked down the steps from the plane and the crowd roared and cheered in welcome. It was fascinating to observe: before she went down those steps, she had to become another person – she had to become 'Barbra Streisand'. She couldn't be the Barbra Streisand that she was, because that wasn't

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enough. So, she gathered herself, she summoned up her film-star image to face the curious public. I think that her authentic, natural 'self' is quite small and shy, not wanting all this fuss, but she knows she *has* to do it, so she gets out there.

When I told this story to Heather, she said that in Indonesia, people *consciously* present themselves in public, so they actually have a phrase to convey that moment when people have to gather themselves up in readiness to perform: '*drempelvrees*' – 'fear of thresholds.' That's what Barbra was doing. We all do it to a certain extent, of course. Perhaps we don't *think* that we officially present ourselves in public; we think that we are carrying our persona inside and outside – but we don't. I know that I don't: I am a different person in public – I'm more upbeat, more fun, more outgoing than I really am in private.

Yentl was Barbra Streisand's pet project – it was an important work, dedicated to her beloved dead father. She was completely in charge of every aspect of the production; every detail had to be absolutely right, and she never relaxed. Consequently, she was tough on all involved. When she came on set, she looked around with a gimlet eye, checking that everything was just so. She was hands-on and sharp as a tack. I remember her arriving on set on one occasion, spotting a book that was upside down and instantly correcting it.

The next time I met Barbra was about ten years ago, on *The Guilt Trip* (2012) in which she starred with Seth Rogen. An offer arrived at my agent from the director: 'Could you come over? It's only a day's filming and we'll give you \$1,000 and a first-class trip.' I asked my agent to reply as follows: 'Thank you so much for the offer. Make it \$25,000 and I might come.' And they did. They were just trying it on. They flew me out first class and it was all extremely enjoyable. Barbra

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said, 'Oh, I remember *you!*' It was a long time ago and she's met a lot of people, so it was nice to be remembered, but she's not really interested in other people and, at the end, she left the set without saying goodbye to anybody, which I thought was a pity. She read her lines from the autocue, which had been placed behind the person she was acting with. One of the other actresses wanted a photograph with her and she refused. And I thought, 'What a pity?' The only time I've spurned a member of the public was once when, desperate to go to the loo, a lady got in my way demanding a selfie. And I said 'Get out of my way or I'll pee on your foot.' She did but I felt a bit mean.



Born in Oxford, England in 1941 & educated at Newnham College, Cambridge,
Miriam Margolyes
is an award-winning veteran of the stage and screen, and an internationally acclaimed voice-artist. Winner of the BAFTA Best Supporting Actress award for *The Age of Innocence*, she received an OBE in 2002 for Services to Drama.

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For publicity enquiries please contact Charlotte Hutchinson:
Charlotte.Hutchinson@hodder.co.uk | 07584 534131

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