



EVENTS

Madly, Deeply: A celebration of Alan Rickman

Alan Rickman was an exceptional performer and human being, much loved by his fellow actors and the general public. This event celebrates and remembers his life and work, and launches the publication of his diaries, Madly, Deeply (Canongate Books). Alongside some of Rickman's most celebrated moments on screen and excerpts from his diaries, the evening will feature some very special guests talking about their friendship and work with him, including Emma Thompson, Harriet Walter, Ian McKellen, Juliet Stevenson, Lindsay Duncan, Eddie Izzard, Stanley Tucci, Ruby Wax and Timothy Spall. Unfortunately, Dexter Fletcher is now unable to attend in person; however, there will be a pre-recorded video message from him. Hosted by Mark Kermode.

'And now Alan Rickman – January can do one' said a distraught friend within seconds of the announcement of the actor's death, itself mere days after the equal shock of David Bowie's departure at a near-identical age (both men were 69, born just six weeks and only a few miles apart in similarly dilapidated London boroughs: in Rickman's case an Acton council estate). Rickman was a later developer than Bowie, only taking up professional acting at 26 and not becoming a true household name until the early 1990s, for all the considerable splashes that he made in *Die Hard* (1988) in the cinema, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1986) on stage and *The Barchester Chronicles* (1982) on BBC2.

But from then on, he was unstoppable, our generation's James Mason or Basil Rathbone, combining a bearing of absolute authority with a seductive menace so languorously smouldering that you could practically smell the oestrogen emanating from the female-dominated audiences that eagerly tracked his parallel stage career. Later in life, he would garner an equally ardent following of younger fans thanks to his saturnine wizard Severus Snape, Professor of Potions at Hogwarts School in all eight Harry Potter films (2001-11), an apparent villain at first who gradually turned out to have a far more complex and sympathetic backstory, conveyed in increasing detail over a full decade. (His impact on this audience and the distinctiveness of his voice was such that my daughter, then aged five, spontaneously squeaked 'Snape!' after hearing him on the radio talking about something entirely different.)

Excelling at both acting and art at school, Rickman initially favoured the latter as offering more stable career prospects, training at Chelsea Art College and the Royal College of Art and practising as a graphic designer for three years in his own design partnership Graphiti. But despite professional success in a creative sphere, he never managed to zap the acting bug, and enrolled at RADA (1972-74) after conquering fears about being the oldest student there (he wasn't, as it turned out). After running the regional repertory gauntlet, that essential training ground for a British character actor, he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon, and made his first television

appearance in the BBC Television Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1978). Although a generally lacklustre production, this worked to Rickman's advantage – his Tybalt jump-started every scene he was in, a feat Rathbone had also pulled off in the 1936 Hollywood version.

(Thirteen years later, Rickman would steal the far larger-scale *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) even more comprehensively with his wench-molesting, Christmas-cancelling Sheriff of Nottingham. 'This will be a healthy reminder to me that subtlety isn't everything', he cheerfully affirmed as he picked up a Best Supporting Actor BAFTA. Much later still, he confessed to heavily rewriting his lines with the help of friends Ruby Wax and Peter Barnes.)

He remained primarily a stage actor until well into the 1980s, appearing regularly with the Royal Shakespeare Company, a background that he drew upon in 1999's delightful sci-fi spoof *Galaxy Quest*, in which his RSC-trained actor Alexander Dane can barely hide his disdain at being exclusively famous for playing a ridge-headed alien with the catchphrase 'By Grabthar's hammer, by the suns of Warvan, you shall be avenged!'. He was so convincing as the haughtily pretentious Dane (Rickman had already played a more famous theatrical Dane in 1992) that it was tempting to believe that he was playing himself, although by all other accounts the offscreen Rickman could hardly be more down to earth.

A smattering of television roles culminated in the Anthony Trollope adaptation *The Barchester Chronicles*, in which his Machiavellian chaplain Obadiah Slope arrived in episode three to offered an early hint of the multifaceted villains that he would shortly make his own (although he later pointed out that he'd barely played a single one after the Sheriff of Nottingham, the popular caricature notwithstanding).

International fame came five years later, courtesy of the Broadway transfer (1987) of Christopher Hampton's adaptation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1986), in which Rickman's Vicomte de Valmont and his ex-lover Madame de Merteuil (Lindsay Duncan) conspire in the cruel manipulation of those less worldly and cynical. It was the perfect Rickman role, and it should by rights have been his on screen, but he and Duncan weren't considered bankable enough when *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) was cast, and they were replaced by John Malkovich and Glenn Close. (Had the film been made just a year or two later, it might have turned out somewhat differently.) Fifteen years later, Rickman and Duncan displayed the same uncanny alchemy (and transatlantic appeal, with ensuing Tony nominations) in a stage revival of Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (2001) as similarly manipulative ex-lovers.

Rickman parlayed this acclaim almost immediately into his first Hollywood role, comprehensively out-acting Bruce Willis's string-vested everyman John McClane in the suspense thriller *Die Hard* (1988) as the German-born would-be supervillain Hans Gruber. Dismissed as 'a common thief' by McClane's wife, Rickman haughtily purrs 'I am an exceptional thief'. The film was also an exceptional success, and a comparatively unexpected one given that even Willis hadn't had much of a big-screen track record up to then.

Rickman's next two cinema films, *The January Man* (1989) and the Australian-set *Quigley Down Under* (1990), were comparatively low-key, but Rickman

then gave one of his defining performances in a small television film originally called *Cello* that was intended just to play a few festivals before finding its natural home in the nation's living rooms. But the ecstatic reception of what became *Truly Madly Deeply* (1990) bought it a cinema release, in the process showcasing Rickman's gift for comedy: as the recently dead Jamie, boyfriend of Juliet Stevenson's Nina, he reappears as a ghost, moves back in with her and generally behaves in the polar opposite way to that suggested by her idealised image of him. It showed Rickman's warmer, gentler side and the timing was perfect, as the film's release a few weeks before *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* prevented him from being typecast as another barnstorming villain.

By now a major star, Rickman continued to alternate between large-scale productions and more obviously personal projects. The latter didn't always come off: the promising-looking *Mesmer* (1994) proved to be a misfire, despite a script by Dennis Potter, although Rickman himself was perfectly cast as the titular 18th-century physician. The following year's *An Awfully Big Adventure* and *Sense and Sensibility* fared much better, casting him respectively as a troubled actor in a theatrical troupe and as the buttoned-up yet essentially sweet-natured Colonel Brandon, would-be suitor of Kate Winslet's much younger Marianne Dashwood.

1996 saw what he described as one of his most difficult roles, Irish politician Éamon de Valera in Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*, not least because on his first day of shooting he had to make a speech in front of a 5,000-strong crowd, many of whom would have vivid memories of the real de Valera and might potentially resent an English interloper playing an Irish national icon. But the film's dramatic tension derives from the constant contrast between de Valera's basilisk-eyed analysis of the course and likely outcome of the Irish war of independence and the more romantic view of Liam Neeson's Collins. The same year, he played another actual historical figure (and from an overlapping period) as the title role in the TV movie *Rasputin: The Dark Servant of Destiny*, which won him both an Emmy and a Golden Globe. (Bafflingly, he was never even nominated for an Oscar.)

He reunited several times with offscreen friend Emma Thompson, first for his directorial debut *The Winter Guest* (1997), in which he judiciously stayed behind the camera bar a tiny cameo, then in *Judas Kiss* (1998) as an incongruous but effective pair of Southern US cops investigating a kidnap gone wrong. They were a married couple in *Love Actually* (2003) – where his design-agency boss (an alternative career path?) discovers too late that even contemplating infidelity can have disastrous consequences – and shared credits three times in the Harry Potter series. Most adventurously, they performed in verse in the medium-length *The Song of Lunch* (2010), as two old flames with differing interpretations of their shared past. 'I couldn't wait to see what he was going to do with his face next', said Thompson of the peculiar pleasure of acting opposite him.

Harry Potter dominated the post-millennium period as far as the big screen went, but he also found time to play the grumpy angel Metatron in Kevin Smith's *Dogma* (1999), the voice of Marvin the Paranoid Android in the remake of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005) and the corrupt Judge

Turpin, meeting an appropriate end at the hands of *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007). He reunited with that film’s director Tim Burton twice more, for *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and its sequel *Alice through the Looking Glass* (2016), in both cases as the voice of the caterpillar Absolem (whose animation was inspired by Rickman’s facial features).

Among his last roles were portrayals of major historical figures, as Ronald Reagan in Lee Daniels’ *The Butler* (2013), and as Louis XIV in *A Little Chaos* (2014), which Rickman also directed. The former performance was disowned by Reagan’s son, but praised elsewhere as one of the film’s brighter spots. Premiered four months before his death, Gavin Hood’s drone warfare drama *Eye in the Sky* (2015) cast Rickman as a senior British military officer involved in an international anti-terrorist campaign. *Screen Daily* critic Tim Grierson’s claim that ‘Rickman’s air of snide superiority is used to good effect playing a military man who can’t believe he needs to answer to those he views as nitwit civilian bosses’ suggests perfect casting.

Describing himself as having been born a card-carrying member of the Labour Party, Rickman was a familiar face at fundraising events, and his more personal projects, such as the stage production *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (2005) and charities such as Saving Faces and the International Performers’ Aid Trust, also reflected his compassionate politics, the polar opposite of those of his Lukas Hart III, ineffably sinister ‘minder’ to Tim Robbins’ right-wing folksinger Bob Roberts in the eponymous 1992 film. Indeed, Radha Bharadwaj’s *Closet Land* (1991), in which he played a sadistic interrogator in an unspecified country, was made in close collaboration with Amnesty International, and Bharadwaj was one many comparative newcomers to the film, theatre and acting profession who were supported by Rickman at a vital early stage of their careers.

On the day of his death, *Channel 4 News*’s obituary programme posited that for charisma, talent and versatility he deserved to be called the British Marlon Brando, but Paul Newman seems just as valid a comparison, because Rickman wore his star status just as lightly, was personally so generous, and nobody seems to have had a bad word to say about him – except of course onscreen. But that came with the territory.

Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, 18 January 2016

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