



'Sensual, rapacious and guileless': Frances Barber as Maxine in 'Night of the Iguana' (Photograph by Richard Milledent)

The basking temptress

FRANCES BARBER epitomises Virginia Woolf's description of a woman's beauty: 'It is like the light on the sea, never constant to a single wave... nor is it dull and thick as bacon, now transparent as a hanging glass. As an actress, too, Frances is a chameleon—it's her changing quality that makes her such a pleasure to watch. She can be delicate and crude, cheeky and vulnerable—in the same performance.

As Viola, in Kenneth Branagh's production of *The Irish Boy*, she made a fine figure of a man (with too fine a figure for a man). In Stephen Frears's film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the camera loved her face (even if the critics hated the film). She can also go convincingly into eclipse to play dowdy characters such as Brenda, wife of a serial killer and manager of a desolate B & B—in Terry Johnson's *Imagine Drowning*. But Frances Barber is at her best as a seductress.

Next week, she opens at the National in Tennessee Williams's *Night of the Iguana*, directed by Richard Eyre. She plays Maxine, 'sensual, rapacious and guileless'. Maxine is the manager of a run-down Mexican hotel. She relies not on the kindness of strangers but on run-arounds and two male Mexican concubines. She's a sort of love caterer: she's originally making provision for her appetites. The role was originally played by Bette Davis, later by Ava Gardner—who took the demands of the part seriously, acquiring two handsome concubines for offstage use.

Frances Barber lives in a pretty street in Kentish Town. On the day we met, she arrived late, a little breathless. She had been walking her dog Nili, a bounding black animal with paint on his fur. She ran up the stairs, looking alarmingly magnificent—she must have caused quite a stir in the park. Her hair (dyed black) was combed sideways and fastened in a gleaming ponytail. She

was wearing a gorgeous, fun-furry coat. Her clothes are tell-tale. Frances explained that she not only gets taken over by parts ('the way I sleep, the way I eat, the way I feel emotionally about myself—everything is affected') but finds the women she plays creep into her wardrobe and call the shots.

Maxine dictates long scarlet fingernails, an impossibly tight dress, glossy tights and shoes. Frances was having a transparent-as-a-hanging-glass day—eyes stary, looped gold earrings gleaming. She has a habit of throwing back her head as if to bask in the sun (an inappropriate mannerism for a Kentish Town girl).

She was born in Wolverhampton, the fourth of six children, daughter of a bookseller in a 'house with no books'. Her mother, who died last year, was a school cook. She went to Bangor and Cardiff universities to read English and Drama, acted on the fringe for six years, then got a job with the RSC in *Camille*. This is her first job at the National. (She is to play Eliza in *Pygmalion* later this year.)

At 33, she said, she has never been happier. Happiness puts a shine on everything she says, but makes her uncharacteristically enthusiastic about the play. *Night of the Iguana* is an interesting, odd, late work, driven by hectic jokes which fail to blur—indeed help to confirm—the sense of a depressed piece of writing, wrung out of misery, formed by low expectations. All the characters are at the end of their ladders (the iguana stuck on the end of a lead is a dismal symbolic mascot for them).

Frances is 'in love' with the play and 'loves' the part—but then find me an actress

who will say in print that she doesn't like the part or that she is uneasy about the play. The above jaded remark is of precisely the type to which Frances would object. She deplores the English predisposition towards cynicism, dampness, rudeness and failed joy. She says it has become clear to her after travelling around the world that we are a frightful and uncivil lot. 'I'm getting more intolerant about

Maxine generates power. Does Frances perceive herself as powerful? 'I do feel very powerful as a woman. I think women must develop their sexuality and joy in their sexuality. Men have forced us to become somehow ashamed of our sexuality, as if it equalled empty-headedness. What I'm trying to invest in Maxine is fearlessness: she's all women, she has a fearsome sexual presence. She's a goddess.' She quotes Tennessee Williams describing Maxine's 'faint smile which is suggestive of those cool, impersonal, all-comprehending smiles on the carved heads of Egyptian or Oriental deities'.

Night of the Iguana is full of fantastic stage directions of this sort, the product of an imagination unconstrained by theatrical exigencies. Could she set out just one of Williams's directions to Maxine? How about this one? 'Her eyes said no in blue capital letters.'

Not fair—Frances's brown eyes are more adept at saying yes. How about this one? 'Maxine reappears at the corner of the verandah with the ceremonial rapidity of a cuckoo bursting from a clock to announce the hour.'

Frances explained that Bob Crowley's abstract design makes much of the ceremony (but she could not convey the cuckoo without Crowley's help). One more try: 'Maxine always laughs with a single harsh, loud bark opening her mouth like a seal expecting a fish to be thrown into it.'

Frances hesitated. 'The other day, coming back from Camden Town tube, a tramp asked me for money. Usually I give 50p, but when I told him I did not have any change, he took a great exhalation and then let out a loud laugh. That's it, I thought, Maxine's laugh.' Frances threw back her head and demonstrated.

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Kate Kellaway Preview Iguana

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Sun, Mar 1, 2020