

Far away on planet Earth

After her acclaimed success as the battered wife in *East is East*, Linda Bassett returns to the stage in a disturbing new play by Caryl Churchill. **JAMES CHRISTOPHER** reports

I THINK I can reveal exclusively to you that the play is set on the planet Earth," says Linda Bassett as if she were guarding the whereabouts of the Crown Jewels. The reluctant hero of *East is East* might be the most gossipy actress in the world, but try to discover anything about her latest role and you might as well try to juice blood from a stone.

The bare fact on offer is this: Bassett has gone west. Not to oblivion, but to the Royal Court, where she stars in Caryl Churchill's disturbing new play, *Far Away*, which opened last Friday and is sold out for its whole run.

A little more of this bloody-mindedness might have gone a long way if Bassett had wired some of it to her prolific career. She hasn't. She makes shrinking violets look aggressive. It's not for want of talent. Bassett is not only an astonishingly versatile actress. She is a staple ingredient in films as disparate and glamorous as *Mary Reilly*, *Haunted*, *Oscar* and *Lucinda*, and *Ayub Khan-Din's* smash hit *East is East*. She doesn't crave the recognition, nor would she ever let it bend her out of shape. Age has something to do with it. But more obviously, she simply isn't made that way.

"Most of the stars of my generation — Maggie Steed, Sue Johnston — didn't seek fame," says Bassett, attacking her mushroom risotto in a glass box at the top of the Royal Court theatre. "When we were in our early twenties — which are probably the years when you're at your most ambitious — we were all in collectives," she says, with fond memories of the Joint Stock company.

"Personal stardom, the cult of the individual ... you just didn't do that sort of thing," she laughs. "It's not that I was particularly Left-wing. I never



A talent to disarm: Linda Bassett in Caryl Churchill's new play *Far Away*

had enough brain to be a socialist. Well, not the right sort of brain."

From our vantage point above Sloane Square we explore the block of flats in Pimlico where Bassett grew up. We're comparing our less-than-stylish backgrounds when her posture gets slightly more erect, her face dissolves, and a lump suddenly lodges in my throat. For a few gripping seconds I'm completely disoriented. If she swept me up and pressed me to her bosom I don't think I would be surprised. This isn't meant to happen. But an unsettling ability to share compassion with a stranger is a natural and extraordinary tool in Bassett's stage armoury.

It's this talent to disarm that turned the key in a rusty

career 20 odd years ago. Bassett was already 10 years deep in Theatre in Education projects when a phone call came for an audition with Joint Stock, which was auditioning, as fate would have it, a Caryl Churchill play. To most of us that might sound as inviting as a night in with a box of Oxo cubes. But back in 1982 it was a young girl's wildest fantasy come true. "What got me was not their politics but their theatricality," says Bassett. She auditioned with a self-devised piece about two mothers from different quarters of Northern Ireland. Churchill hid behind her hands, as if in horror, and Bassett went back to Bolton in tears. She got the job. What Bassett thought had horrified Churchill, actually moved the writer so much she could barely watch.

Bassett, in her late forties, has had an otherworldly relationship with new writing ever since. "I used to thrill to things I didn't understand as a child," she says. "I remember reading *Alice in Wonderland*, aged nine, and underlining all the dialogue in the Mad Hatter's tea party. I liked the idea that there was something deep behind the story that I could sense but not reach. I must have been seeing things as plays long before I ever saw any."

Bassett hit gold as the wife of an Asian chip-shop owner, played by Om Puri, with a half-dozen mixed-race children in *East is East*. She was a revelation. She was nominated for best actress by both Bafta and the Evening Standard. She was also one of the only actors to

survive when the stage play was transferred to screen. If she had gone for the all big classical Kenneth Branagh roles she lusted after it might all have been very different.

"I yearn for a meaty classical role. I once had an availability check for *Lady Macbeth*. That's all it was. I remember going to have a bath that morning, and I couldn't move. I was so excited. I created the whole part in the tub. It never came. The fashion now is to have a young lady. If any blokes of my generation, or older, play *Macbeth*, they don't want me. They want someone in their twenties. It's happenstance. When I was 18 and dreaming about acting and watching the leading ladies they were in their thirties."

"When I got to my thirties the fashion was that leading Shakespearean ladies were in their twenties. I thought, 'Oh no, I've only just got good enough to do it and now I miss out. I've always just seemed to have missed the boat somehow. I used to be tempted to think it's because I was working-class. That, and what I looked like. I don't want to get bitter, twisted or excited about it. I've had other opportunities. *Cleopatra* is still within the realms of possibility."

"But if I had a chance to relive my life again I'd really want to be a naturalist. Or a shepherd. They're very romantic, shepherds. Except that sheep get all sorts of tics."

● *Far Away* is at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court, box office 020 7365 5000.

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Hit: Linda Bassett with Om Puri in *East is East*