

Acting legend Glenda Jackson back on our screens at 83 – and in typical feisty form



by Paul Simper

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THERE aren't many double Oscar winners — or former members of parliament, for that matter — who are happy for you to call them at home to discuss their latest work. Even fewer who use a landline.

But Glenda Jackson — Best Actress Oscar winner for *Women In Love* (1969) and *A Touch Of Class* (1973), and redoubtable Labour MP from 1992 to 2015 — is not one for standing on ceremony. And she has even less time for mobile phones.

'I don't have any of that,' she says. 'I have no artificial intelligence. I've only got a landline. I don't have a computer. I'm out of all that. I think I'm the lucky one when I read what people have to put up with.'



Heartbreaking: Jackson's character Maud has Alzheimer's PICTURE: STV PRODUCTIONS/MARK MAINZ

But being behind the digital curve has hardly held her back. Since she relinquished politics and returned to acting, her work has been phenomenal: two towering interpretations of *King Lear* at London's Old Vic and on Broadway, and a Tony award-winning lead role in *Three Tall Women*.

But it was TV that made her a national treasure, thanks to her imperious turn as Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth R*, and now Jackson's back on our screens as Maud, an octogenarian mother and grandmother experiencing the early stages of Alzheimer's in BBC2's one-off mystery drama, *Elizabeth Is Missing*.

Smartly adapted by Andrea Gibb (*Swallows And Amazons*, *Call The Midwife*) from Emma Healey's bestselling novel, Jackson's Maud is heartbreaking and truthful, at times funny and mischievous, and unflinching in the most unfussy, unsentimental way.



Phenomenal: Jackson has the energy of one half her age PICTURE: REX

The two mysteries Maud is trying to solve concern the recent disappearance of her best pal and gardening partner Elizabeth and, in a dual timeline, that of her long-lost sister Sukey, last seen in 1949.

So how do you solve a mystery when you can't remember the clues? As Alzheimer's slyly begins to pull the rug from under her, Maud lashes out at those closest to her: her daughter, granddaughter and carer.

'I had a meeting with Dementia UK, which helped me enormously,' says Jackson, now 83, who leads a quality cast that includes *Gentleman Jack*'s Sophie Rundle and *The Virtues*' Helen Behan.



Best actress: Jackson won Academy awards for her roles in *Women In Love* (1969) and *A Touch Of Class* (1973) PICTURES/ALAMY

'When I was still a member of parliament, one of my responsibilities was to visit old people's homes and one of the things I found most upsetting when one saw people who were either suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's was that their personalities were entirely different to what their families had known. Someone you've known all your life and never heard them utter a single swear word would suddenly be vituperative and really very angry. I raised this with the doctor when we met with her. She said it's frustration. That I found very helpful. I can understand that very well.'

As a drama, *Elizabeth Is Missing* is more of a character piece than a political polemic but it still raises vital issues.

'How do we as a society take care of a growing ageing population?' ponders Jackson. 'It's a big issue. I'm not trying to make a great political thing out of this film itself but it is something we need to learn to deal with.'

Has she made provisions herself for a time when she might not be in such good health?

'It isn't something I would say I spend a lot of time seriously thinking about but the next big thing for me is death,' Jackson notes matter-of-factly. 'So obviously I've got to start thinking about how one prepares for that.'

It feels a long way off, given that Jackson exudes the energy and commitment of someone half her age. Her strong work ethic, instilled growing up in a working-class household in Birkenhead, impressed the whole production. She even tackles her own stunt when Maud takes a tumble, although she is loath to categorise it as such.

'Good God, it was hardly a fall,' she chuckles. 'All I did was lie down.'

Small beer for an actor whose career high points include a cameraman landing in her lap when she was rolling around naked playing Tchaikovsky's wife in Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers*.

Elizabeth Is Missing is set to broadcast four days before the general election. Is there part of her that would like to be back in political life, banging heads together and sorting things out?

'If it was possible to bang heads together then, yes, I would be delighted,' she says. 'My big fear is that on December 13 we will be in exactly the same place as we are now.'

Surprisingly, considering her oft-expressed antipathy for Baroness Thatcher, she doesn't discount the possibility of portraying the former prime minister.

'It would be entirely dependent on the script,' she says. 'You cannot be judgmental of the character you are playing. You have to see the world through their eyes. I've seen a couple of performances by actresses of Margaret Thatcher and they were both extremely good.'

Glenda Jackson as Margaret Thatcher? That would be an even bigger shock than Brexit.

■ *Elizabeth Is Missing* is on BBC1 on Sunday at 9pm