

THE WAY I AM

“There are lots of things I WANT TO DO”

Miriam Margolyes, 77, on why she wants to talk to her enemies, the support of her mother and her very particular knickers from Amsterdam...

What is your earliest childhood memory?

I was sitting in my pram outside our house. A lady came up to me and said, “Now if you suck your thumb like that the big bad man is going to come and cut it off.” I remember thinking, “What a stupid woman. Does she think I believe that? The idiot.” I just knew that she was talking through her bottom.

Where does your acting talent come from?

All of my talents, whatever I have, come from my mother. Mummy really wanted to be an actress herself but of course nice Jewish girls didn't do that then. But she never lost the ability to be dramatic in every way. My mother did everything possible to give me confidence and make me feel special and talented.

What is the best thing about your job?

The best thing about being an actress is being with people during rehearsals. I simply love the camaraderie, the jokes and the talks. We had larks on *Call the Midwife*. I was the newbie but everyone was so welcoming. It's the people that you work with that make it special. People call us “luvvies” in the most derogatory way. They shouldn't. Luvvie means people who love. We love each other and we love our work.

What are your pet hates?

Brexit and Trump. I can't avoid it but I don't think I should avoid it. I think I have to take it on board. We live in horrifying times. I do get into heated debates. I am very opinionated. I am a militant atheist, anti-Zionist and anti-Brexit. And yet I feel

that it is vital to keep having a dialogue even with the people you most despise. You have to keep a human connection because if we stop talking to people we start killing them.

Do you have a favourite fashion item?

Are you joking?! My favourite fashion item is a pair of knickers. My knickers are very particular to me. I buy them in Amsterdam. My partner dyes them from white to dark navy blue. They come from a very cheap chain store and I buy about 10 at a time.

How do you relax?

Doing genealogy on the computer. My cousin in Philadelphia used to send updates to my family tree and I just got involved in it. Now I've got 15,000 names in my family tree and I'm finding new people all the time. The most thrilling discovery I made was that my great-grandfather was a criminal. He was sentenced in 1877 at the Old Bailey for fraud and receiving stolen goods. He went to jail for seven years' hard labour in Parkhurst, Isle of Wight. On his release he emigrated to South Africa so I have many relatives in South Africa.

What do you do with your acting awards?

I don't pay any attention to awards unless I win and then I think they are terribly important. I keep them in my study. I've just won another award for my recording of *Bleak House*, which was recorded for Audible. I do 50 different voices.

Is there anything you are afraid of?

Death and fascism, I suppose. Not in that

order. Once I'm dead I don't have to worry about fascism. I would never have thought of being afraid of fascism until quite recently but I see this frightening resurgence around the world and I fear for the future. I thought I was safe in England. I'm not sure now.

Who would be your dream dinner party guests?

I would love to have Barry Humphries and Claire Tomalin (the English journalist and biographer of Charles Dickens). Barry is wonderfully caustic. Claire is just the most delightful, warm, witty, knowledgeable person about Charles Dickens who is my big pash (Miriam received an Olivier nomination in 1992 for her West End one-woman show, *Dickens' Women*).

What is top of your bucket list?

I don't actually have a bucket list. But there are a lot of things I do want to do before I die. Generally in life I would like to have less challenges now. *The Lady in the Van*, which I am doing (Miriam is in Australia starring in the play by Alan Bennett) is eight shows a week. I really don't think I want to do eight shows a week again. Unfortunately I have already committed myself to doing just that this November. I am doing a play at Finsbury Park's Park Theatre called *Sidney and the Old Girl*. I'm so lucky to be working though. w&h

Miriam is providing the voices for *Where Is Peter Rabbit?*, Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, 5-28 April, trh.co.uk

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