

Fiona Shaw

Audio Guide transcript

Fiona Shaw, one of Britain's finest classical actresses - has won many film and theatre credits since her career began in the 1980's. She's particularly renowned for a series of powerful, sometimes controversial, stage performances – the most hotly debated of which was perhaps her portrayal of Richard II.

This portrait was painted by Victoria Russell. Having shadowed the actress for some time, at work and in her home, Russell eventually chose a neutral domestic setting. Shaw sits in a state of half undress - calm, relaxed, and yet somehow monumental - against an improvised backdrop of draped sheets.

'Her interest was to try and get a woman in transition. This was rather hurtful to me. But I was in my early forties and she just wanted to get a woman in her early forties, just in that moment when muscle was turning to fat...'

Ironically, during the sittings were being made Fiona was playing one of her most physically demanding roles, in the Greek tragedy 'Medea'.

'It's an incredibly hard sprint of a play with these enormous battles and not least the carrying of two dead children who were growing daily under my care ...and I had to stay very strong until the end of the play. So I had quite a regime, and I think by the end of the run of that, I was so tired from the emotional fatigue of it and the physical tiredness of it ...'

'Victoria only knew me as an actress but I think as she got to know me as she came for the sittings - she came to know me as a person and I have to say that the face is very much the face of the person I am. More than me, it's the face of my father who has that look - slightly startled - and twists his mouth slightly to that side when he looks in the other direction, as I do - I mean I didn't even know I did that - but she's caught absolutely the features of my family and I think that's astonishing given how little she knew me...

I think that she did an incredible job because I think it's an incredibly brave painting. I think the actual size of it is brave and I think the insistence on making it that scale but I suppose it was iconic and I think she associated me with iconic roles that I played - like Electra, or Hedda Gabbler, or Medea...I honestly it's a real dialogue between her and I...'