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INTERVIEW

Jean Rogers: Ageing, Gender and Equity

Josephine Dolan & Hannah Grist



Image 1.

The inclusion in this special issue of an interview with Jean Rogers simultaneously fulfils and unsettles expectations of, to use the phrasing of the journal's advice to authors, what it means to be 'a leading practitioner in the field'. Despite playing Dolly Skilbeck (following Katharine Barker) between 1980 and 1991 in 948 episodes of *Emmerdale Farm*, renamed *Emmerdale* in 1989 (ITV 1972 -), and more than fifty years as an actress of television, film, stage and radio, Rogers is neither a major household name, nor a recognised luminary of the award-winning, celebrity circuit - what she terms, 'one of 'the handful'. We first met Rogers when giving evidence to the Labour Party's 'Commission on Older Women' (anon. a 2013) where she impressed with some highly acute perceptions about the intersection of age and gender in the acting profession that results in the invisibility of older actresses – except the few known as 'national treasures'. This interview with Rogers took place on the 3rd October 2016 in London. With her life experience as a 'jobbing actress', five terms of office as Equity vice-President during which she has championed economic rights for audio-visual performers in both the UK and Europe, Rogers represents a unique combination of professional

longevity, multi-media experience and campaigning leadership that offer invaluable insights to this issue.

Born in 1942, Rogers comes from a modest background where her acting ambitions were fueled by a love of cinema. Typically, her early training involved ballet, singing and elocution lessons prior to the Guildhall School of Drama, which she entered at seventeen. Ever the strategist, Rogers left the Guildhall School months before graduation in order to take a place in the Farnham Repertory Theatre, and therefore qualify for the Equity card that ensured her right to work in what, until 1988, was a 'closed shop' industry (McNaughton 2013). These early career years established for Rogers the dynamic connection between campaigning, performing and family life that continues to drive her activities. Notably, a website entry, 'founding member of the National Theatre' (Rogers undated) rightly claims the kind theatrical cultural capital privileged within the British acting milieu. But equally, it underscores the start of her campaigning since The National Theatre's 1963 move to London's South Bank from its previous base at the Old Vic theatre followed years of activism by Rogers and a committed group of actors that included Laurence Olivier and Billie Whitelaw, who were supported by London County Council despite Tory government cost-based prohibitions.

By this time, Rogers had established a niche in radio drama where the daily routines proved to be far more conducive to the responsibilities of motherhood than those of the theatre. Clocking up over 1500 broadcasts, she worked for seven years with Radio 4's *Listen with Mother*, two with the BBC School's Television programme, *Watch*, as well as playing children in various radio dramas. Throughout this period, ITV's unique mix of industrial, economic and artistic concerns (Johnson and Turnock 2005) enabled Rogers to gain invaluable television experience and exposure through occasional small roles in some of commercial television's most iconic series, *Crossroads* (ITV 1964-1988, 2001-2003),

Emergency Ward Ten (ITV 1957-1967), *General Hospital* (ITV 1972-1979) and *George and Mildred* (ITV 1976-1979), before gaining the part of Dolly Skilbeck in Yorkshire Television's *Emmerdale Farm*. While the following eleven years gave some economic security in what is a highly precarious occupation, Rogers discovered that the grueling schedules of a bi-weekly television soap opera hardly constituted a 'family friendly' working experience. A single mother at this point, her children were aged nine and eleven as she rehearsed and recorded in Leeds, and as she says elsewhere, 'They got used to seeing me only at weekends' (Thomson 2014). Rogers's position offers a useful caveat to that of Judi Dench who famously cites motherhood as the rationale for making the transition from stage to small screen acting (Nathan 2011). Whilst television is obviously a better option than theatre, it is far from ideal for working parents. Obviously, the problem of securing a healthy work/life balance is not UK specific, and these days Rogers works with the European International Federation of Actors and contributed to the E.U. Audiovisual Industries, Social Dialogue Committee, to find and promote examples of good practice in this area.

Now in her seventies, Rogers continues to act, particularly in regional theatre, whilst parts in two films, *The Peacemaker* (Leder 1997) *The Lazarus Child* (Theakston 2005) have finally fulfilled her childhood ambitions. More recently, Rogers wrote, directed, produced and starred in *My Dear Miss Terry*, a production which explores the letters between George Bernard Shaw and Ellen Terry and one which offers an 'amused – and occasionally bemused – commentary on the modern world,' (Sinclair 2016). But there is little doubt that most of Rogers's energies are channeled into Equity and working for actors' welfare, now as an Honorary Life Member who chairs the union's Advertising in New Media and the New Technology and Games working parties. Previously Rogers has chaired successful negotiations with West End Theatre managements that improved pay and conditions for actors and has championed the freedom of artistic expression through her position as Chair of

the Anti-Censorship working party at the time of the *Jerry Springer: The Opera* controversy. Rogers also played a major role in European networks, notably with the EUROFIA Gender Equality Steering Group whose funding by the European Commission supported publication of its 'Report on Age, Gender, and Performer Employment in Europe' (2008) that highlights the age and gender disadvantage experienced at casting by female performers, and which is followed up by campaigns such as that for 'Equal Representation of Women in Film/TV Drama,' and the ERA 50:50 which seeks to achieve greater equality in representation and pay for women by 2020.

Rogers's commitment and drive comes from personal experience of gendered inequalities which include fewer opportunities for women in all performance media, and working schedules that profoundly disadvantage women who are mothers. As revealed by three successive, unsuccessful attempts to follow Beatrix Lehmann's tenure as the only woman to have held the Equity Presidency from 1946-48, the actors' union is not gender neutral, and its patriarchal formation is usefully highlighted by image 1 in which Rogers is dominated by the portraits of previous male incumbents. As the interview below illuminates, Rogers is increasingly addressing the questions of age that are central to this issue, especially its gendered dynamic as it impacts on actresses who are typically overlooked, rendered invisible and all too frequently reduced to penury in what continues to be an industry of male privilege.

Jean, you have had a very long and varied career. Perhaps your most memorable role is Dolly Skilbeck in ITV's Emmerdale Farm, whom you played for eleven years. Did you enjoy playing her?

JR: Of course! Dolly was not an exciting character but she was like a sister, a very nice, kind sister that I wanted to protect. I used to get quite upset about the fact that she desperately

wanted a baby and did not have one, those kind of things. I took her on as a sort of - as a responsibility in many ways. I liked her. Dolly was a good sort. She was not silly and she was not wet – on the contrary, she liked a good laugh. Dolly was kind - and I hate that people automatically presume that if a character is kind then they are boring. Dolly was not boring! It is difficult, I think, with a soap like that - the acting is more difficult because you have got to be real. It is different if you are playing a nasty character or something like that. You can just be a bit naughty with it! But I think it is quite hard work to establish an ordinary person that people will think of as their mother or their sister or their aunt. A lot of my fan mail said things like, “Oh you're the daughter I never had!” Or, “I feel you're like my Mum.” To me that is what drama is about really - representing people, particularly women.

Emmerdale was not initially an issue led drama, but it arguably became so as the series progressed. What are your thoughts on issue led dramas and on current British television drama in particular?

JR: Yes, initially, *Emmerdale*, was set up as a character based drama - you see it was set up as a series originally. We have all seen it, haven't we? We have seen series that we have really enjoyed and then the go-ahead has been given for another series and they change. A recent example would be with the BBC's drama *The Fall*, which we have had three series of. The first two seasons were beautifully filmed, beautifully acted and so on, but arguably the third series was a little bit indulgent, there was not really a lot going on. There is a problem with serialised dramas with a good script and good characters when it gets so big.

You have clearly got an eye to the motives of producers and the ways in which they structure the television dramas we see. Were you ever tempted to go into direction or production?

JR: I have actually recently gone into actually writing, directing and producing myself for the stage. I will talk a little more later about my work with Equity, but one of the main reasons I

began work on *My Dear Miss Terry* [Rogers's play] is to do with the progression of women's careers - particularly actresses - within our industry. Our careers peter out. You get to 40 or 45 and suddenly you find yourself on the way to being invisible. People often say "Oh, it's all to do with the writers! So you should go into writing," and so on.

I like having that relationship with an audience which is very hands on, especially in theatre. But even television you get the feedback from audiences. There is something around performance and sharing something with an audience that has always appealed to me. In radio, it is that thing of just talking to one listener - the one person. It is that concentration, and it is so important - the one to one thing. At the end of it, the humanity is there, the revealing of what it is to be human. That is such an important talent and gift if you have got it.

In your previous role as vice-President and now as Councillor of Equity, you have spoken passionately about the limited and derivative roles available for older women in film and television. How did you first become aware of the issues facing older actresses?

JR: The opportunities for actresses as they age is limited, but it is not just me who has noticed. The Bechdel test, for example, is truly extraordinary and highlights the ways in which films are unrepresentative of the diversity in society. It is a very simple test. First, a film might be judged a 'good' film if it has two female characters in it. It only has to have two - it might have ten men but only two women – but if these two female characters have scene together where they talk together, that forms the second criteria. The third criteria to judge whether the film is 'good' or not, is whether those two women talk about something other than a man. It is so simple. But how many films fall foul of that? Back in the 1980s I was not that aware of the knock on effect of the predominant attitude that men speak for all humanity. I'm using 'speak' in terms of what we read, what we see, what we hear. Whether

it is on any of the broadcasting media, it is all around us - no wonder women have that feeling of invisibility.

With your activism regarding the representation of women in the media in mind, then, how do you think the legacies of feminism have affected your career?

I remember Germaine Greer ... But I do not think I really took in feminism at that point during the 1970s – I did not properly think it all the way through. At the time I thought, it's not going to happen to me. It was only really recently that I thought about what Greer says later about the menopause (1991). She was saying that I am a eunuch now. I have stopped menstruating, I am not productive and so I am going to be viewed as worthless. Actually in the end completely invisible.

You have women in society who feel that, too, not just those who work in the media. The number of anxious, sixty-year-old women working in shops and so on. They are being kicked into touch by thirty-year-old fellas, because these young men are supposedly the ones coming up with the ideas; they are the ones who are dynamic and so on. All that - and yet I look round at my friends - my friends who are the same age as me. My best friend, for example, she is a head turner, she is really wonderful and she is sexy. She is an older woman; nobody is denying that. But she is vibrant, she is energetic and there are a lot of us about - lots of us feel undervalued by the media.

What are your thoughts about those older actresses who do seem to be incredibly valued, actresses such as Dame Judi Dench for example?

JR: You mean the handful? Oh yes, they are valued because they are accepted. The thing is that actresses such as Judi Dench are accepted because they have become national treasures. They say that of Joanna Lumley, too, that she is a national treasure. Talking about actresses such as Judi Dench and Joanna Lumley as the 'handful' is dangerous because it might sound

as though I am criticising them which I am most certainly not. These women are fantastic actresses and really do represent older women, there are just not enough of them.

How far do you think ageism and sexism are linked in the media?

JR: Before I go much further, I just want to state that I am married to a man and I love men so I am not knocking men in that way, but I do believe that there exists a boys' club in all areas. But there is this thing that suggests a woman is only ever acceptable if a group of men have decided they will let her.

For a woman like me to suddenly stand up and say "Right, I'm leaving this, and I'm going to speak out on this," it is difficult. I suppose eventually I will be viewed by these boys' clubs as a threat, and I have already heard that said - that I am a threat. Initially, women are viewed with scepticism, "Oh, what's she doing? Who does she think she is? Oh, how funny!" In this context, men do not really listen to women. They might listen but certainly not once she gets to a certain age, these men are not going to either look at her or listen to her. As a result, we are as women pressing to be allowed to lead things, to be in a position on a board to actually make decisions alongside of men.

There comes a point whereby the general feeling seems to be "Yes, that is alright but the top person should still be a man." You begin to see the pattern. You notice that women are generally not in a position of power for that long. We will be denigrated at some point, somebody else will come in. Of course, this is a generalisation but you see it happen so often. It is about being allowed. You see, the entitlement allows us and we have had hundreds and hundreds of years of entitlement. If you think about it, women have been emancipated since what 1928? So, our emancipation is still young in the annals of time. Which doesn't mean that it's not overdue.

Do you think that men encounter a similar form of ageism as their careers progress?

JR: Victimisation and ageism can both apply to men. But sexism very rarely happens to men. I do think older male actors are beginning to get worried. Every now and then you read some interviews with older male actors who allude to this - Robert Lindsay, for example, said in an interview with Equity in 2013 that he felt there was ageism. The interesting thing is that once men begin to see the problem, then often that problem gets addressed. But it is only addressed because the men are beginning to see it for themselves.

This does not, unfortunately, necessarily mean that the problem of ageism in the media is going to get sorted out for the women who have been going on about it and have done all the work. Again that is so unfair really. I do think that since the beginning of the new century there has been more and more an emphasis on youngsters. This is not to suggest that they are not important – young people have always been important. I know when I was young in the profession I was always looking up to those who had been before and feeling that I could learn from them and understand. But today, there seems to exist this sense that older people are simply old fuddy-duddies. I think that women get more of the brunt of that than men do. That again is what makes society unhealthy. To me, a cast list should have people of both sexes and of all ages.

But this equality of representation simply does not happen for female actresses, and similarly for women whose roles might be in production, in film and television in particular. Maybe not so much radio. Certainly for film and television, women have tended and continue to be there to be decorative.

The issue about image and physical appearance in screen media is critical. Do you think there is a lot of pressure exerted on women in the public eye generally, and on older actresses in particular, to do rejuvenation?

JR: Oh yes. This was one of the first issues I tackled in 2005. At that point I been on Equity's Council for eleven years, and I now found myself as vice-President. I got involved with the Women in Film and Television group, and with a film they were putting out ... called *Searching for Debra Winger*. The film was to be shown at the BAFTA along with a panel discussion. That was the first time that older women and their representation on screen was really being examined at in a conference type setting.

I wrote an article for the Equity magazine called 'To Botox or Not to Botox.' It was written around the time when Botox had suddenly become really fashionable. There was a horrendous story at the BAFTA panel discussion. [British actress] Rula Lenska was interviewed about ageing and she told this story of how she had this opportunity to go to America to be in a television series. Rula received the contract and she was about to sign it when she came to this clause right towards the end which said something like 'We reserve the right to renew your contract on the understanding that we decide whether you have corrective surgery or not.' Rula said, 'I looked at this contract and I realised that I was giving them the right to decide whether I could have my face cut about.' She said, 'I can't sign that. I can't give them the right to tell me when I should have my face cut' So, she stepped away from it.

I sometimes stand in front of a mirror and think 'Oh, look at that!' Then I am reminded of Rula's story. All this cosmetic surgery means that older actresses will not be able to play that part unless they have had a boob job. The arts influence, the media influences and that has always been my reason for campaigning. That, at the end of it, our job is to represent women, and to represent men. Whether we are representing the good in women or the bad in women or how women could be, we have that responsibility. All we are doing is encouraging women to feel even more insecure, that is by us not having the chance to portray

them as they are. We are not even portraying women as they would like to be – we are not even getting that.

How far do you think the media represents older women in stereotypical ways?

JR: The media is full of stereotypes. You are young, you are beautiful, you are more accessible, you are malleable, you are fun. Or you are the victim. These are all stereotypes of women. When you get to a certain age, however, you suddenly become the best friend, you are the mother, you are the witch, the loopy one. Where are all those other women? The only women that get the opportunity to portray all those other subtle representations of women as they get older are the handful that we know so well. They should be there, of course, but there is also a myriad of other ways in which those characters could be portrayed. This is because there is a myriad of different experiences of ageing - not everybody looks like and behaves like Judi Dench or Maggie Smith. There are some people who do, of course, and that is wonderful but not all older women are like that. We do not see it.

When I got involved with the gender issue through Equity and FIA (the International Federation of Actors) a friend and colleague, Agnete Haaland, told me to always count - she said, 'Wherever you are Jean, just count. Always count.' I do that, I look at a billboard and count – there, for example, is a young woman in the middle and there are five men around her, two are older and three are young. I do not just count the billboards; I also look on the bookshelves. Look at the covers of books. There might be a book about Maggie Smith; there might be one about Judi Dench but there are many books about all these older men who have climbed mountains and been Head of Broadcasting, or great sportsmen – they are all there. I find it sad that women don't always notice. Some women do not understand why it was an issue that Miriam O'Reilly was pushed off *Country File* and that she won her case.

Miriam O'Reilly's case was a fascinating example of ageism and sexism in the media, and it was a real triumph that she won her case. What do you think are the economic implications of ageism in the media for older women?

JR: I do not necessarily think that the economic implications of ageism relate solely to women, as it does happen to older men as well. But one example that springs to mind is that of Joan Sims, the wonderful actress from the *Carry On* films. Joan died in penury, yet the *Carry On* films were being shown time and time again on television. So the public knew her and they must have thought, 'Oh she's doing alright.' She was not doing alright at all - and this has happened to men as well. That is the nature of the business, that you can be known for a particular show or film and yet struggle financially. This is one of the reasons why I am so much a part of the union and of BECS and put a lot of time to it, because of the rights of performers to have a share in any profit that was made out of their performance.

If this is true of female performers, I think it is also true of a lot of women in society. A lot of women are single and are living in poverty. I think then it comes back to how the population sees itself represented. A lot of men, in positions where they could do things for women, do not see that there is a problem. But women, too, often do not see that there is a problem - but there is a problem. Women are being paid less and lots of them are doing part time work, particularly older women.

What do you think the future looks like for young actresses entering the British film and television industries?

JR: The whole climate has changed so much. The closed shop of Equity, to me has not helped, because the media portray the profession as 'Anybody can do it.' When you do work on, say a student film or something like that, the last people to be paid will be the actors. So you have youngsters coming into the profession who often are given the idea by reality shows

and by the media in general that they are going to be discovered and it will be a lucrative life. Lots of youngsters come straight from university, suggesting that media studies are the way forward. There are lots of universities which offer media studies, but the UK business simply is not big enough to take all those people coming in. They can be four years in the business without ever earning legitimately. It is tough, especially when young actors and actresses are given this idea that there is a lot of money to be made in the industry.

With the penury of many older actors and actresses in mind, is Equity still in a position to do any kind of welfare work?

JR: We have Denville Hall, which is a retirement home that is sponsored by Equity and certainly a lot of money goes into its running. It really survives I think on people bequeathing money, as it is quite expensive to be there.

We also have an Equity Trust Fund which helps people retrain when they get older - and we have found that women more so than men tend to retrain. A great friend of mine [...] retrained with some help from the Trust Fund about 10 or 12 years ago. My friend now works on quite big films as a dialect coach and occasionally she gets the odd role.

The main thing that Equity has done is talk; negotiate agreements. For example, a few years ago we had a strike which resulted in royalties being paid on videos sold by the film studios. We allowed the planned *Harry Potter* and a *Bond* film to go ahead on the understanding that if we won the fight they would pay up on any subsequent video sales. It was a really amazing negotiation. Yet, we have only got back so far. There has been a refusal to go back too far - which is sad really because a lot of the old films do get shown and it is the older actors and actresses who suffer.

That was a really important intervention. Do you see the work that Equity does in this way as some sort of 'future-proofing'?

JR: Of course. It is, of course, the people who were performing way back who often most need the money now because they have reached their old age. I remember when I was Chairman of BECS, receiving a lovely letter from the wife of Barry Foster from *Van der Valk*. When he died, obviously all his monies went into an estate. His wife sent a really lovely letter saying, 'Oh, just when a terrible bill drops through my door suddenly I get a little cheque from BECS and it makes all the difference to my sanity.' That to me is what it is all about.

Do you think that the precarious economic position of older people is particularly exaggerated for those within the acting profession worldwide?

JR: Yes, definitely. More women go into acting, too, and to me that is the sad thing. There is less opportunity to have a pension, less opportunity to even get on to the property ladder. To have an equity in something. But this stands true for anyone, whether they are male or female. Germany and Russia, for example, used to have standing companies to try and mitigate this situation. Certainly in Sweden there are many more legislations that help try to foster an equality, as there are in Norway, and also legislation for actors and actresses who are parents. These are in particular working to be women-friendly and make sure that there is an understanding about babies and how actresses can balance their career and their family commitments. This is terribly important.

Here in the UK we are beginning to get that too, it is beginning to happen in the industry because the men are getting involved. That is obviously a positive thing but it is so sad those issues get taken seriously only when it affects the men.

In 2005 I had only just become vice-President and I made one of my first jobs to go along to the Women's Committee meetings. One of our councillors was an older woman, in her 80s. I went along and found that they were trying to secure money for research into the portrayal of

older women. Well, what we found from that European Commission funded research¹ was published in the January of 2009, and I presented some of the research in 2012 at Harriet Harman's Women in the Media and Public Life – where we met.

You certainly made a passionate intervention at that event. So, after ten years as ~~Vice-~~ President of Equity and now as a Councillor, are you still campaigning?

JR: I don't think I have ever stopped! This is now my twenty-second year as an Equity Councillor, and all my campaigns are terribly important to me. Gender equality is very important to me, particularly that of older actors. It is simply because half our membership are women and a good proportion of them are older women. I feel that my work as an Equity activist is about representing all the membership. All the issues that affect our members - whether it is what might be happening in film or television or theatre - affect women as much as men. I have therefore got lots of campaigns like rights and credits for women, and these are ongoing. The Arts Council have said that they are monitoring the situation and diversity is a big issue. My big problem is discussions about diversity issues in these contexts tend to be under the umbrellas of culture, ethnicity, or disability. My argument is that if you are a woman in the British film and television industry and you fall under any of those umbrellas the situation is even worse. I will accept diversity when it comes to age, but otherwise I want to see gender equality.

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