The Divine Miss Em

Two years ago, Emma Thompson ditched stardom for motherhood and a sojourn in Africa. What she learned there ignites her heavenly return in December in HBO's Angels in America.

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Of the three roles Emma Thompson tackles in HBO's *Angels in America*, you'd think the magnificent angel would be the toughest. "The angel was a breeze compared to the gay nurse," Thompson tells *POZ.* "She had a Queens accent. That

"I found really hard."

Were she doing the Queen's accent, of course, Thompson would have had no problem at all. The British actor became a bold-faced name by appearing in high-brow costume dramas and big-screen Shakespeare (Much Ado About Nothing and Henry V, both with ex-husband Kenneth Branagh), eventually nabbing two Academy Awards: one for Best Actress (for her role in Merchant Ivory's Howard's End) and one, impressively enough, for Best Screenplay (for Sense and Sensibility). She also cut her teeth as a stand-up comedienne and player on numerous BBC sitcoms. Angels author Tony Kushner, who adapted his Pulitzer- and Tony-award-winning play for the small screen, didn't have any doubts about Thompson playing the "impossibly difficult role" of the angel, and not just because of her proven versatility. Comparing her to Vanessa Redgrave, Kushner says, "Emma has a moral authority that you see in all her work. It has to do with who she is outside her performance."

And just who is she? Besides a down-to-earth mother to 4-year-old daughter Gaia and wife to Greg Wise (who played Sense and Sensibility's hunky cad), she's also a tough-talking, sometimes foul-mouthed political activist who, in the last few years, has made African AIDS her priority. "I didn't choose it because it's some sort of favorite charity," she says. "It's the biggest problem facing mankind."

Thompson's experience with AIDS dates from the mid-80's, when her mother, actor Phyllida Law, performed in La Cage Aux Folles in London's West End and numerous members of the cast died from the disease. In 1996, she lost a close friend, the British journalist Oscar Moore, who chronicled his battle with AIDS in the British newspaper The Guardian. "I was very much in love with him at university, the way one always is with gay men," she says, adding as an aside, "Thank God I wasn't a ballerina." She calls Moore's last days "a journey we took together."

But Thompson didn't become an AIDS activist in earnest until 2001, when her mother took her to

an event in support of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria and TB, hosted by the British charity ActionAid. Listening to the speeches and hearing the statistics about AIDS in the developing world prompted Thompson to travel to Uganda in the summer of 2002 in the company of Noerine Kaleeba, an ActionAid boardmember and founder of one of Africa's largest ASOs, the African AIDS Support Organization. "They came back best friends," says Lyndall Stein, the group's international marketing director.

The British channel ITV produced a half-hour TV documentary from the trip, and the European edition of Marie Claire printed portions of Thompson's travel diary. Thompson has planned awareness-raising trips to Africa every year for the next 10 years and will collect her missions' diaries in a book. She has also committed a sizable sum of her own money to help build a school in Uganda for poor children. "The problem in many countries in Africa is brain drain," she says of her choice to fund education rather than medication. "Noerine's big bugbear is that there are no leaders."

Thompson is adamant, however, that leadership isn't just an African problem. After a second fact-finding trip there this summer, this time to Mozambique with Stein, Thompson accused Western governments of "psychotic detachment" from the African AIDS epidemic. She told POZ that, despite Bush's $15 billion pledge, the situation amounts to "a form of racism."

"What pisses me off to no end is that the U.S. and the UK find money in three hours to fight a fucking war where they kill thousands of people that we had no quarrel with," she says. "But then they can't find even a percentage of the money we need to meet our basic obligations [in Africa]."

Thompson resists the temptation to suggest that an HBO movie about two gay white New Yorkers will somehow help poor, HIV positive Africans. "Were you to show [Angels] to someone dying of AIDS in Africa," she says, "it would be fascinating for them, but it would not be relevant at all."

On the other hand, she hopes that for the post-protease crowd in first-world countries, Angels will recall an urgency and anguish that many are eager to forget. "It's like having the Holocaust as a subject," she says of the play's mid-80s setting. "You're looking at a large group of people going through a terrible, terrible thing, as it were, alone. My friends who were positive at the time, those who survived, speak about it and just go, 'You can't imagine what it was like'" Of today's rising infection rates in the U.S. and UK, she says, "You have to keep reminding people that this is a disease that kills you. It's no fun to have. We need a new AIDS campaign and we need it yesterday."

In order to know what AIDS was, in fact, like back in the day, nurses who had worked in AIDS wards in the '80s briefed Thompson and her heavyhitting costars Al Pacino and Meryl Streep, as well as director Mike Nichols on their experiences (Nichols worked with Thompson in the HBO adaptation of the devastating cancer drama Wit) . But it wasn't always serious business on the set, especially when Thompson got to strap on those fabulous wings. Sure, the soundstage cables may have worsened her back pain. But, the actor admits, "I've always wanted to fly."

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