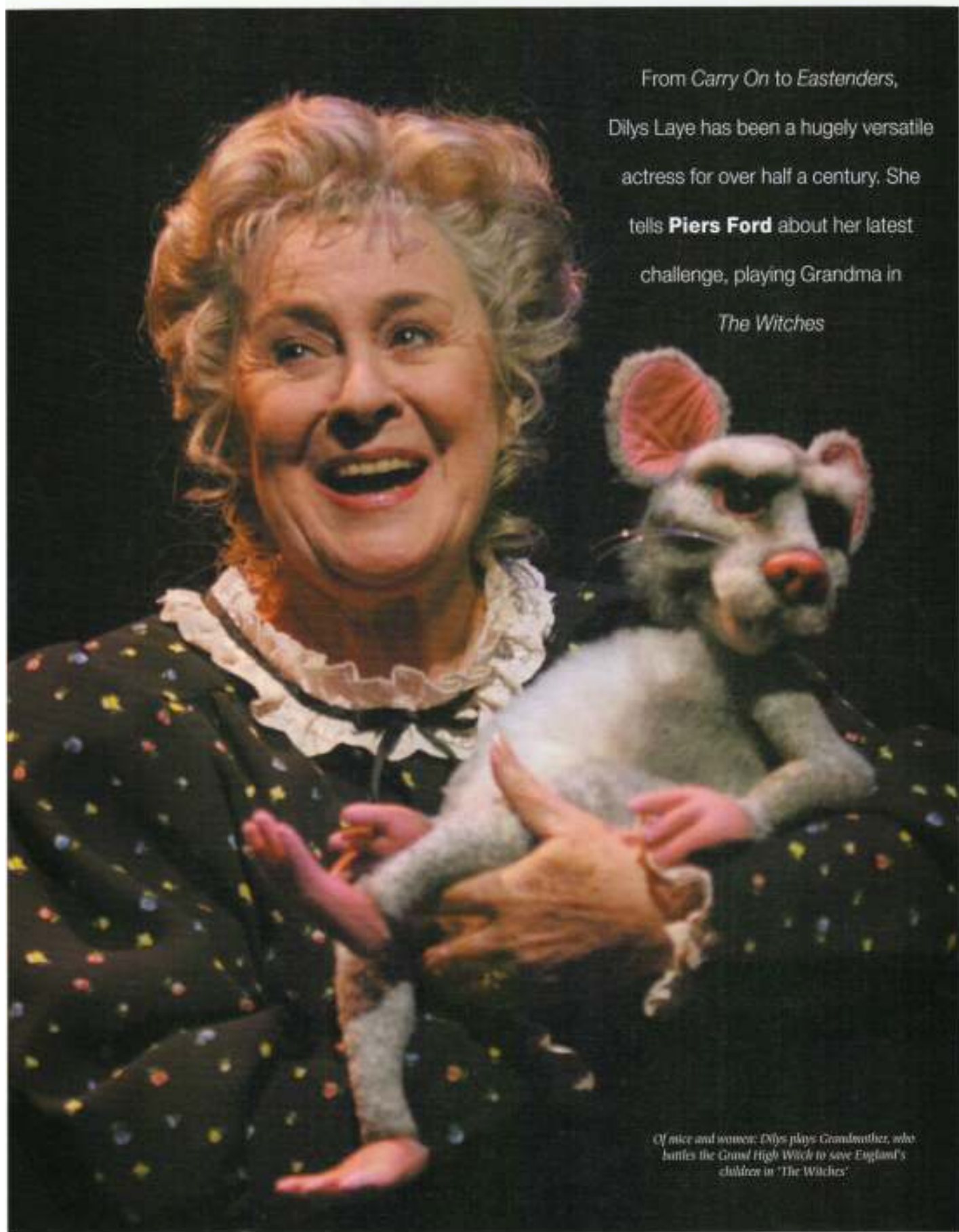


Playing it the Laye way

From *Carry On* to *Eastenders*, Dilys Laye has been a hugely versatile actress for over half a century. She tells **Piers Ford** about her latest challenge, playing Grandma in *The Witches*



Of mice and women: Dilys plays Grandmother, who battles the Grand High Witch to save England's children in 'The Witches'

I versatility is the character actor's most valuable currency. Dilys Laye is one of the wealthiest women in the business. In an award-winning career (last year she won a Terence Donohue best supporting actress award for her Madame de Rosemond in a West End revival of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) that has spanned more than half a century, she has achieved the near impossible feat of becoming a familiar face without falling prey to typecasting.

Dilys' latest incarnation is as the grandmother in David Wood's adaptation of the Roald Dahl children's favourite, *The Witches*, which arrives at Norwich Theatre Royal this month. She is, says Dilys, a figure who represents "unconditional love," complete with a Norwegian accent. With her grandson, who suffers a temporary metamorphosis himself, she must battle the combined might of the Grand High Witch and her cronies who want to turn all the children of England into mice.

It's a busy, intense role that involves playing opposite puppets for the first time. "They have such personalities and they don't answer back," she says. "But at the same time it's exhausting because the energy to give them life has to come from you. Roald Dahl never pulls his punches: although there's a lot of pantomimic comedy, brilliantly done by the child-mice climbing enormous staircases. It's quite dark and frightening. I play the grandmother as a fey little old lady, who is wise and feisty with tremendous courage."

Dilys says this latest tangent in her professional life is simply down to the way people perceive her. "Each medium I've worked in, people have seen me in a different way," she suggests. "I went through a period of playing neurotic glamour women in the theatre. Adrian Noble always sees me as an evil witch—I did the First Witch for him at the RSC—but then I also played Mrs Medlock (a benevolent character who rather paved the way for the grandmother in *The Witches*) for him in *The Secret Garden*. And in the *Carry Ons* (she did four of them) I was always the dippy, cute little thing. On radio I worked a lot with Peter Barnes, who wrote Mother Courage-type, earthy women for me. I'm not a sex symbol like Diana Dors was. I was never the lovely, pretty woman like Julie Christie or Jenny Agutter. I've always been a character lady, so I've never been typed. And I think to survive in this business, a woman has to be able to do everything."

She went to New York with *The Boyfriend* in 1954. It was, remembers Dilys, an exciting time, full of promise. "It was the first British musical to be a success on Broadway for 21 years. Julie (Andrews) and I went over together. The theatres were all very close together. On a

Sunday you'd find the cream of Broadway at somebody's house, round the swimming pool. It was the height of the Bob Fosse period. There was *Cam-Cam*; *Damn Yankees* opened while we were there, and *The Pajama Game*. It was just a wonderful period. We met everybody; we were all gangs together. I had my 21st birthday there. Julie and I were sharing a flat and I was taken out for the evening. When we finally went back the whole of Broadway was in the apartment, and my bed covered in presents. Julie and another friend had done it all. It was magical."

When she came home roles in *Blue Murder at St Trinians*, *Doctor at Large* and *Carry on Cruising* confirmed her place at the heart of a crop of



Drawn quiet: while Dilys is happiest on stage, her varied career has included parts in the 'Carry On' films, 'Coronation Street' and 'Tilly's City'

actors whose names evoke a gentle, more innocent age of British comedy. They also proved that Dilys, character actress or otherwise, could certainly do pert and sexy when required. Twice, she was paired to great comic effect with Bernard Bresslaw, who loomed over her petite frame. Making these films, she says, was like belonging to a large, happy family. "It was lovely to be part of because we always had a good time," she adds. "Even if you weren't playing a massive lead, everybody was friends and there was no hierarchy."

But it's the stage that has provided Dilys with many of her favourite roles. At the RSC in the mid-1980s she was thrilled to play five very different parts in two years. Apart from the First Witch in *Macbeth* ("The Scottish Play" while we're in her dressing room), she was also the Nurse ("great fun") in *Romeo and Juliet* with Sean Bean and Niamh Cusack, Irma in Genet's *The Balcony*, Mrs Needham in *The Art of Success* and Glinda (the good witch) in *The Wizard of Oz*. She admits that at one time she had a hankering to play "Lady M" herself. "I must say I love that play. There's just something about it I find very exciting. And it's such brilliant writing about the way ambition can make the strongest person ultimately weak, how power affects different people: some blossom with a little bit of power and kill everything."

However, she's no stranger to lead roles. Dilys has also been a memorable Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*, played Golda in *Fiddler on the Roof* and rustled up the most macabre meat pies as

Mrs Lovett in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Musicals have sustained her through some difficult times, particularly when her late husband was very unwell. "I do love to sing and if I hadn't been able to do musicals, racing around the country in *42nd Street*, Ken Hill's *Phantom of the Opera* and *Oklahoma*, I wouldn't have been able to keep the family buoyant," she says. In less stressful circumstances, she recently spent a year as Mrs Pearce in the Drury Lane revival of *My Fair Lady*.

While theatre is clearly her first love, Dilys also enjoys her television work. A couple of rather fraught roles have allowed her to flex her dramatic muscles. In *Coronation Street* she played a lady with Alzheimer's and for five months in *Eastenders* she was Maxine, a sympathetic mother-in-law to the hapless Nigel. The speed of the production schedule left her breathless. "Television is fascinating but everything's so sudden. You can't go back and improve it," she says. "I remember my first scene in *Eastenders* was a great long spiel. I did it, the director called 'Cut!' and I turned to my fellow actor and said I thought we could do it better. Darling, the lights were already out and

we were on to the next set. He said that we hadn't fluffed our lines, we hadn't bumped the furniture and that was that. I'd be in the makeup chair at eight in the morning, on set at nine and be driving home by 11, having done my scenes for two episodes, wondering what had happened!"

Dilys is enjoying her time with the young cast of *The Witches*. "There's such a lot of love and courage in this company," she says. "Originally I was only contracted until the end of our West End run but I so fell in love with them and I couldn't bear to let anybody else have the grandmother! As you grow older, you have to pace yourself. But there's still a tremendous amount of energy and madness in me. I love it; and while I

do, I'll continue to act. I wouldn't do anything else." As she says this, her eyes shine with real emotion. **ae**



Dilys Laye appears in *The Witches* adapted from Roald Dahl's classic story, at Norwich Theatre Royal, Tuesday 17th to Saturday 21st May. Call the box office on 01603 630000 for times and ticket details.