

Through the window, not the door

Tim Adler was met with resistance – including lawyers' letters – when writing his thorough family history of the Redgraves

The House of Redgrave: The Lives of a Theatrical Dynasty, by Tim Adler (Aurum Press, 336 pages, \$32.99)

Saturday, June 22, 2013

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Unauthorized biographies of showbiz celebrities are legion. Kitty Kelley wrote tell-alls about Frank Sinatra and Oprah Winfrey; Andrew Morton had fun with Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie; Donald Spoto gave us Laurence Olivier and Marilyn Monroe, blemishes and all. The upcoming fall publishing season promises more ink on the superstars: Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Daniel Craig, to name a few.

Done without the celebs' participation or permission, books like these carry a whiff of the salacious, enticing readers to discover the "true" story behind the headlines, away from the publicists' spin. But making a good, page-turning read without official access is no mean trick. The threat of legal action against the author and publisher is ever-present. It can even be enough to nip a bestseller in the bud.

Tim Adler learned that the hard way. After writing two exposés of Hollywood culture – *The Producers: Money, Movies and Who Really Calls the Shots* (2004) and *Hollywood and the Mob* (2007) – the British freelance journalist came out last year with *The House of Redgrave: The Lives of a Theatrical Dynasty*, an unauthorized history of one of Britain's most famous and prolific thespian families.



The Redgraves in the 1940s. (L-R): Michael Redgrave, son Corin, wife Rachel Kempson, daughters Lynn and Vanessa

If he could do things over again, Adler wouldn't.

"How can I put this?" said the 48-year-old author, whose book was published in mid-2012 in Britain and last April in North America.

"Having written about the Redgraves, it made me realize that I never want to write another non-fiction book that does not have the co-operation of the subject. Because, I mean, the book was so hard to write. At times it really felt like banging my head against a wall.

"I couldn't understand," Adler said 10 days ago from his West London home office, "why the family was so resistant to my writing about them."



Tim Adler

Resistant, and menacingly litigious. Before publication, the book was serialized in 2011 in excerpts in the Daily Mail tabloid newspaper. When they saw it, the Redgraves' lawyers bore down hard.

"All hell broke loose," recalled Adler, a former London editor for Deadline Hollywood who bears a striking resemblance to American actor Miguel Jose Ferrer, George Clooney's cousin. "Immediately, the lawyers' letters started arriving, with the effect that the book couldn't be published. All the booksellers were frightened to stock the book – even the mighty Amazon.

"We were really stuck."

Adler's book spans four generations, from Edwardian-era repertory theatre troupers Roy Redgrave and Daisy Scudamore to their famous son Sir Michael, to his daughters Vanessa and Lynn and son Corin, to Natasha and Joely Richardson, Vanessa's progeny with director Tony Richardson. Besides a brief correspondence with Vanessa and a phone call to Natasha, Adler got no help from the family on his book.



Michael Redgrave in the 1940s

Worse, after the excerpts starting appearing in the newspaper, he got outrage. A lawyer for Vanessa and Joely wrote his publisher and bookstores claiming that the serialization was "riddled with gross inaccuracies and unfounded assertions."

Joely herself wrote an open letter to the Daily Telegraph, calling it "silly as pie on the one hand, highly defamatory on the other."

The Times of London got behind the book, however, saying it was "odd" that Vanessa Redgrave, "a great believer in free speech," someone who is "a United Nations goodwill ambassador and in 2004 set up a political party, Peace & Progress, founded on the UN Declaration of Human Rights," would want to block an established writer from publishing a history of her family.

The book was delayed for a year, allowing a second biography of the Redgraves – Spoto's *The Redgraves: A Family Epic* (Crown Archetype, \$31) – to beat Adler's to the market. Spoto was a friend of Michael Redgrave and his actress wife, Lady Rachel Kempson, and wrote his book unimpeded by the family. He insisted it was "in no sense an authorized biography," but ran into none of the trouble that Adler, an outsider, did.

In the end, there was no lawsuit. With one passage removed and a small change made in the title – on the advice of Adler's lawyers, the word "secret" was dropped from *The Secret Lives of a Theatrical Dynasty* – the doors to The House of Redgrave were opened up for anyone to peer inside. And like a great British estate that starts letting in tourists, the book doesn't disappoint.

There's the titillating stuff of supermarket tabloids: the bisexuality of Michael and Tony, the adultery that fractured both households, the booze, the love-starved children. There's the radical '70s politics of Vanessa and Corin, fervently pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist. There's the untimely deaths of Natasha (after a skiing accident in Quebec) and Lynn and Corin (both of cancer), within just over a year of each other.

But above all, there's the story of stage and screen.

"As an acting family, the only comparison I can think of to the Redgraves is the Barrymores, in the States. They're a very powerful and influential family, and unusual in that you have not one, not two, but three and even four generations, all of whom have gone on to achieve fame and success on their own merit," said Adler, singling out Vanessa in particular for her "luminous" stagecraft.



Vanessa Redgrave in 1967

Unlike Spoto's book, which is essentially a biography of Michael Redgrave with honourable mentions of the rest of the family, Adler's is primarily devoted to Tony Richardson, who in his heyday was one of the best-known directors in Britain. In fact, the book was conceived as one about the director alone, Adler feeling that Richardson, who died of AIDS in 1991, has been unjustly passed over by history.

"He co-founded the (revamped and) influential Royal Court Theatre in London," Adler said, "and was also responsible for a whole new wave of British cinema in the early-'60s," with working-class dramas like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and social comedies like *Tom Jones*, his free-spirited adaptation of the classic Henry Fielding novel, which won the Oscar for best picture in 1964.



Tony Richardson in 1962

Raised in Nottingham, in the British Midlands, Adler felt a northerner's kinship with the Yorkshireman that Richardson was. Although he never met the man, on holiday once with a college friend he did stay in a house in Provence rented out by Richardson. In its heyday, *Le Nid du Duc* (the Owl's Nest) had been a secluded hillside retreat for stars as diverse as Mick Jagger, Jack Nicholson and Margaret Atwood.

"The more I found out about Tony, the more I realized you couldn't understand him without describing his relations with the rest of the (Redgrave) family, who circle each other like a solar system," Adler writes. Yet at first, he kept his ambitions modest. Spurred by some initial enthusiasm for the project by Richardson's eldest daughter, Natasha, Adler stayed focused on her father and plugged away.

Then, in March 2009, came the terrible news: Natasha had died, age 45, in a freak accident on a training run at Mont Tremblant, where she'd been vacationing with her son. The rushed effort to treat her brain injury had been unsuccessful. Amid massive media attention, her husband – Hollywood star Liam Neeson – was left to grieve her loss with the rest of the clan in America and Britain.

Adler, who recounts the events of that awful week with sensitivity in the book's penultimate chapter, could only watch silently from the sidelines and plan his next move.

"I assumed that the family would want me to carry on writing the book (about Tony Richardson), but at that point the shutters slammed down," the author recalled over the phone.

There was no point wasting the extensive archival research and many interviews he'd already done with Richardson's friends, including Edward Albee, Susannah York and Diane Cilento (plus many others who didn't want to be quoted). "My editors said, 'Look, you've got so much material here already, why don't you just widen the scope of the book to make it about the entire family?' And so that's what I did."

Now the book is published and – if luck has it – will come out in paperback in a revised edition, with helpful appendices like a family tree and a list of the actors' stage and screen credits. (A few errors – Vanessa didn't just have a "small part" as "one of two dolly birds" in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, and murdered family friend Gale Benson wasn't really Jackie O's half-sister – will be corrected too.)



Natasha Richardson

What's next for Adler? Certainly not another celebrity biography. *Slow Bleed*, now being shopped around to publishers, is a "psycho-medical thriller" about "a woman doctor who hunts down a patient who has kidnapped her son, but nobody believes her story," the author said. "Basically it's *Flightplan* (the 2005 thriller starring Jodie Foster) in a hospital."

Lurid stuff, indeed. But no risk of a lawyer's letter for that surely.