

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Alan Rickman: The
Unauthorised Biography

Maureen Paton

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About the Book

Alan Rickman is an enigma. Widely known for his portrayal of Professor Severus Snape in the hit Harry Potter films. Rickman is also one of Britain's greatest stage actors, embracing everything from Shakespeare, Chekhov and Noel Coward, to directing Ruby Wax on stage. He has also appeared on television in shows as varied as Rasputin, The Barchester Chronicles and Victoria Wood with all the Trimmings, though global fame came with his move on to the big screen. His first part as terrorist Hans Gruber in Die Hard and he has gone on to star in such diverse movies as Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, Sense and Sensibility, Dogma and Galaxy Quest. He has shown his versatility as the villain, the comic actor and the romantic lead and, while his award-winning performances have made him a leading man directors call, his air of mystery, his smouldering good looks and his unique voice have made him an international sex symbol.

Yet behind all this glamour lies the west London working-class socialist with strong political principles. Hollywood is the dream factory, yet Rickman's heart is often within the theatre. His reputation suggests a man difficult to work with, so is he similar to the characters he plays? Or is that the mark of this great actor - that he is nothing like them?

In this revised and updated biography, Maureen Paton encompasses the private, professional and political life of this most enigmatic, charismatic and intensely private of actors.

Alan Rickman: The
Unauthorised Biography
Revised and Updated Edition

Maureen Paton



To Liam

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PROLOGUE: VINEGAR IN THE SALAD

CALL HIM A luvvie at your peril. According to one of his oldest female friends, he's the epitome of passive aggression. The passive-aggressive syndrome in psychology sounds impressive, but needs to be demystified. It used to be known as 'silent insubordination' in the Army: in other words, good old-fashioned bloody-mindedness. This syndrome says everything about the stubborn temperament of the internationally renowned British actor Alan Rickman. You can see just how this tall and scornful perfectionist, the nonpareil of nit-pickers, came to embody a formidable intelligence and reined-in power. He could never play a weakling.

At just over 6ft 1in and big-boned with it, he has the haughty bearing of a natural aristocrat. All his showiest roles point to a sense of innate superiority, from the terrorist Hans Gruber in *Die Hard* and the Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves* to the megalomaniacal Rasputin in the film of the same name and the disdainful Professor Severus Snape, scourge of the schoolboy wizard, in the *Harry Potter* films. It's a look that says he's a member of the theatrical master-race.

Which is a problem, since he's also a member of the Labour Party. Paradoxically, this enigmatic actor is a painter and decorator's son from working-class Irish and Welsh stock who was raised on a west London council estate. Given his high-profile support of socialism, he's oddly private about his humble background and doesn't do the cloth-cap-and-clogs routine. He has a rarity value, since he gives little away about himself. Alan Rickman, as all his

many friends in the business testify, has a horror of anything that smacks of self-promotion. He backs shyly into the limelight. At the same time that he simultaneously opened in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and in the West End with an acclaimed revival of Noël Coward's *Private Lives*, Alan Rickman's sepulchral rasp could also be heard as the Genie of the Lamp for the Christmas pantomime *Aladdin* in one of the poorest boroughs in London. He recorded the performance for free on the condition that there was a publicity black-out.

Rickman has a strange aura around him that is extremely successful. However, he's also known to be socialistic and has avoided the honours trap. So he trails this remarkable integrity by being very Jesuitical about publicity; yet on the other hand he's a famous actor.

Indeed, on screen and stage, he can project everyone's idea of seigneurial decadence; an impression that gained hold when he played the first and best incarnation of the vicious Vicomte de Valmont in the acclaimed Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Yet Alan Rickman longs to be thought of as a true man of the people. Inevitably, there is a conflict between his past and his present that he has never quite resolved.

Those narrow Grand Vizier eyes, the colour of pale amber, seem to look down his long nose. There is something of the Marquis de Sade in his anachronistic appeal to women as an arrogant, feline fop. His sudden gestures can be transfixing: Rickman has the most extraordinary way of laughing quietly with a sort of silent snicker, a grimace that contorts his face.

His personality is piquantly flavoured sweet-and-sour, Chinese style. The two phrases that crop up most about him are: 'He doesn't suffer fools gladly' and 'He's a guru.' They are by no means mutually exclusive; one has the feeling that, for many admiring acolytes, the rigorously principled Rickman has the elevated status of a jealous god who is just

as likely to smite the sinful with a plague of boils as to reward the godly with his gracious approbation. They look up to him even though Rickman himself has admitted that his main vice is 'a wounding tongue. I'm working on it; perhaps it's the Celt in me.'

In a notoriously insecure industry, he is regularly paged for advice as if he were a Delphic oracle. 'He likes to be everyone's guru,' says the playwright Stephen Poliakoff. Rickman keenly feels the powerlessness of the actor's passive role, which is why he's a great organiser of support networks for fellow thespians. He espouses causes. In his heart, he's Don Quixote; in his head, he's Sancho Panza.

Yet he has his own raging insecurities, which may account for the public sulks when he can seem a spectacular misery-guts. There is the recurring stage fright that affects this most theatrical of animals: 'I get gremlins in my head, saying, "You're going to forget your lines",' he told *The Times* magazine in 1994. Film was a liberation in more ways than one. In June 2002, after a triumphant Broadway opening with an acclaimed, award-winning London revival of Noël Coward's *Private Lives* that reunited the *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* team of Rickman, Lindsay Duncan and director Howard Davies, Rickman told the US TV interviewer Charlie Rose: 'I think I'm better at the stage work because of film work. The trouble in the theatre is that there's this huge fear. It's something that I guess is connected to adrenaline and focus and energy, but it's a useless thing - like some gremlin that sits on your shoulder and tries to make you fail. And often succeeds. At least on film if you screw up, you know there's another take. And it [the fear] doesn't get any better. I'm seriously thinking of trying to find some kind of hypnosis that will get rid of it.'

Sometimes there's a sense of simmering resentment underneath his surface calm; if he's the proverbial cold fish (given that there's no such thing as a warm fish), he is one that swims in hidden depths.

Occasionally, a bitterness breaks surface: 'Some actors have opportunities and shapes given to them,' he once said to John Lahr in *Woman's Journal*, January 1993. 'Not me. I've had to guide my career and seize any opportunity that came my way.' He made his first film, *Die Hard*, at the late age of 42 because he came cheap.

One publicist remembers with a shudder how rude Rickman was to her when he was still unknown. Perhaps it was simply her proximity to the Press, because he detests the snap judgements and pigeon-holing tendencies of the Fourth Estate. Yet scores of actors and writers testify to his warmth and kindness, even if he's not nearly so supportive of directors as a breed. 'All his roles have attitude,' as one former associate, the theatre director Jules Wright, puts it. 'Directors fear to take him on.'

'Alan has a lot of attitude . . . which is another aspect of control,' says his playwright friend Stephen Davis. 'I get the impression it's a bit arbitrary. He does have this awesome side to his character. Alan Rickman is the only person I know who will make me nervous about what I'll say next. He won't let you be self-pitying or gratuitous.'

In Hollywood, he has achieved the status of a brand-name: they now routinely refer to 'an Alan Rickman role' whenever they want someone with the gift of playful evil.

This multi-faceted man, who also created the comedienne Ruby Wax and discovered the award-winning playwright Sharman Macdonald, has walked away with film after film by turning his villains into warped tragic heroes with an anarchic sense of humour. Indeed, he's had such a spectacular career in grand larceny on screen that no one would guess he was born with a speech defect. It has made him so self-conscious about his voice that he still fears death by review as his frustration and despair at the critical mauling for his National Theatre debut in *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1998 showed only too clearly. After that disaster at the age of 52, he told one friend that he felt like

never going back to the theatre again – even though he will say to people that he never reads reviews. Yet Rickman’s bravura assurance and style has given him a greater following than Hugh Grant, fifteen years his junior.

‘Alan has a quality which is attractive to both men and women. It’s what makes star quality: it means that *everyone* is looking at you,’ points out Jules Wright. ‘Ian McKellen and Mick Jagger have it too; so do Alan Howard and Alec Guinness. There’s an ambivalence: they’re not macho, but they’re not particularly feminine, either. There’s an ambiguity there.’

The bizarre downside to the public fascination with this intriguing maverick comes in the form of sackloads of intrusive and obscene mail from otherwise respectable women, for whom he represents some kind of sexual release from repression. A typical letter to Alan Rickman goes: ‘Dear Mr Rickman, I have always considered myself a staunch feminist, but you have a very disturbing effect on me . . .’

Even worse was the malicious correspondence from a (male) grudge-bearer who found out where he lived and made a point of sending him any bad reviews he could find.

For no one ever feels tepid about Alan Rickman. He inspires fierce loyalty, admiration and widespread affection, but some are highly critical of his apparent intractability.

‘He’s too intelligent to be an actor,’ is the blunt opinion of one friend. That sets up a constant tension, partly because Alan is a frustrated director and partly because he entered the business at a relatively late age.

He has acquired a reputation for being difficult, culminating in damaging publicity on the litigation over the film *Mesmer*. The movie that was to provide him with his first lead role in the cinema became mired in law-suits. Rickman stood accused of intellectual arrogance; yet the real truth about *Mesmer* is more complex than mere tantrums. Alan himself, always his own fiercest critic, did concede in front of a packed audience for a question-and-

answer session at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 1995 that fame had probably corrupted him 'to some extent' by causing a mild outbreak of childish foot-stamping. Yet he had told Duncan Fallowell in the *Observer* a year earlier, 'There are plenty of people more "difficult" than me. Juliet Stevenson, for example. I would say that "difficult" means a highly intelligent human being who asks pertinent questions and tries to use her or himself to the fullest extent.' So there; trust Rickman to answer his carpers by turning the criticism into a compliment and throwing it back at them as a challenge. Even, it has to be said, at the risk of pomposity.

There is also an extraordinary allegation that, in the wake of the so-called Rivergate fiasco that lost him the chance to run his own London arts centre, Alan Rickman was seen handing out copies of a published letter of support from leading drama critics to a bemused queue at a fashionable London fringe venue. Not to mention a stand-up row in the foyer of another theatre with his rival to run Riverside, which had never - until this book - been reported. There's even talk of a confidential document that went missing.

Despite his languid image, there is clearly a lot of the street activist left in this former art editor of a radical 60s freesheet that was based in London's answer to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury: Notting Hill Gate.

'Having done something else before acting made him a better actor,' says the writer Peter Barnes, a long-standing friend. 'It was a very deliberate U-turn.' The theatre director Michael Bogdanov, another mate, agrees: 'It's often an advantage in starting late as he did. Actors go to drama school far too young.' Alan has all the doubts of the late starter, with an understandable neurosis about his age: no one in his inner circle knew in advance about his landmark 50th birthday in February 1996. 'His age was a closely guarded secret,' says Stephen Poliakoff. 'Actors are much more secretive about their age than actresses.'

At the age of 38, a gloomy Rickman was in almost Gogolian despair about his long-term prospects in a wayward career that seemed to be going nowhere. Jules Wright remembers one outburst in Sloane Square at two in the morning after a meal. 'Alan suddenly said to me, "Nothing's ever going to happen for me. No one will ever notice me. My career isn't going to go anywhere."'

He also told *GQ* magazine: 'I lurch from indecision to indecision. All I ever seem to do is smash up against my own limitations. I have never felt anything but "Oops, failed again".'

As with all great actors, he takes a lot of calculated risks that have inevitably meant several brushes with failure. After learning his trade and paying his dues in provincial repertory theatre, he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company for a short and unhappy season in which he thought himself an unattractive misfit. He felt compelled to leave because, as he put it, he wanted 'to learn how to talk to other actors on stage rather than bark at them.'

As a television unknown in the early 80s, he went on to steal the BBC drama series *The Barchester Chronicles* as an ambitious young clergyman whose divine unctuousness upstaged such major players as Donald Pleasence, Geraldine McEwan and Nigel Hawthorne. Later he explained that, typically for Alan, he based Obadiah Slope on all the Tory politicians he detested, starting with Norman Tebbit and Margaret Thatcher. That was the first of many defiant challenges. Rickman rarely gives interviews; but when he does, they can be more like military skirmishes.

His shiftiness had become a star turn, yet he was still a recognisable face rather than a name. Only when he was invited back to the RSC in 1985 for a second chance did he reveal his true range in the leading part of the *Vicomte de Valmont*.

However, playing a professional seducer in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* for almost two years nearly drove him mad:

the political ideals that now make him feel guilty about his immense Hollywood bankability also make him yearn to be thought of as one of life's good guys. Yet there he is, playing a rapist or a murderer. It offends his puritanical streak.

'We had a harmonious relationship: affection is important to him,' insists the film director Mike Newell, who worked with him on *An Awfully Big Adventure*. 'He has private demons,' admits Peter Barnes.

One of them is his ambivalent attitude towards the sexual power that has played its part in making him a major star. 'Alan is incredibly aware of his professional sexual charisma,' says Stephen Davis. 'He has hordes of women writing to him. There is evidence that it gets in the way, and he wants to avoid being cast for it.

'He's not an exploitative person in his private life, not in the remotest a sexual predator. He's vexed by this image, this matinée-idol hold over the audience. In his personal life, he has enormous self-control . . . unnervingly so.' Alan was to remark tartly: 'I have never been remotely sexually voracious, whatever that is . . . but maybe I'll be sexually voracious next week.' In the grand old tradition of keeping them guessing, it was another example of his dry sense of humour.

For Rickman is a one-woman man who has known Rima Horton, his first and only girlfriend, for more than three decades. Their fidelity to each other is a legend. 'He's similar to John Malkovich, though not, perhaps, to Valmont in *Les Liaisons*, the character they both played, except in one important respect. Alan is quite unpromiscuous - which is very rare for actors,' says a friend, the playwright Dusty Hughes. Like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir or the late Peter Cook and his last wife, Alan and Rima keep separate establishments within a mile of each other. In 1989 they split up in order to stay together - but apart.

I interviewed Alan Rickman over the telephone in 1982 for a feature in the *Daily Express* on his performance as the

oleaginous supercreep Obadiah Slope in *The Barchester Chronicles*. This breakthrough role introduced him to millions and made women, in particular, aware of his perverse sexiness. In that role, he sulked for Britain. He sounded suspicious to the point of hostility until I started inserting a few jokes about Slope into the conversation to lighten the atmosphere. I could almost hear the Titanic-sized iceberg slowly cracking up and defrosting at the other end of the line as the voice relaxed.

Given that he was playing a woman-chaser with such slithery conviction, questions about his own domestic set-up seemed justifiable, especially since he had managed to reach the age of 36 without the ritual march to the altar. In appropriately churlish Slope mode, Alan refused to discuss his private life. Later, someone told me that he had lived with the same woman for a long time. Just how long, not even their best friends knew.

I was subsequently to discover that Rima Horton and Alan Rickman have been together since the mid-60s, an impressive record by any standards whether in or out of wedlock. He met Rima, a labourer's daughter who became an economist and politician, at Chelsea College of Art in 1965. They appeared on stage in various amateur productions when he was nineteen and she was a year younger. That early shared interest plus his exact age - Alan is as vain as the next man - and his second name of Sidney were his most closely-guarded secrets. Not even Rima's friends knew that she was once an actress in the dreaded Ham Dram; perhaps she is too embarrassed to mention it in the same breath as Alan's career.

They are considered to have one of the strongest relationships in the business despite - or perhaps because of - the absence of children. It has survived the setting up of separate flats, when Alan decided he needed his own space and moved out of Rima's apartment to buy a maisonette.

Though the decision alarmed all their friends for quite a while, the arrangement seems to suit them both. So far they are as solid as ever. If he is a pessimist, she is an optimist. 'Rima has a very sunny nature, she's very pragmatic with her feet on the ground,' says Peter Barnes. 'It helps that she's not in the profession herself, a great help.' Espousing the easy-go attitudes of the 60s, they have never bothered to get married. Who needs a ring for commitment? Yet Peter Barnes, Alan's oldest friend after Rima, told me when I met up with him again over a plate of oysters in August 2002 that he had a gut feeling Alan and Rima would suddenly surprise everyone and tie the knot one day after all. 'I'm expecting their marriage to happen; it's the old romantic in me. And as he goes up the aisle, I shall be laughing madly,' Peter added fondly. Such steadfastness is remarkable in Rickman's peripatetic profession, since he necessarily spends much of his time abroad on location. 'Rima and Alan are like-minded people - it's a common-law marriage of true minds,' says the playwright Stephen Davis. 'They were once in CND together. They argue a lot about politics.' Indeed, a fervent political discussion is their idea of a good night in.

Alan has acknowledged that the reason for their relationship's longevity is that Rima is 'tolerant. She's incredibly, unbelievably tolerant. Possibly a candidate for sainthood.' And why, pray, does she need to be so tolerant? 'Because I'm an actor,' he added, only too aware of the self-obsession and insecurity that his profession breeds. 'I've never learned that trick of leaving business behind in the rehearsal room; I bring all problems home, I brood. But Rima just laughs and goes straight to the heart of the matter. No matter what problems she has, she puts her head on the pillow and goes straight to sleep.' Sounds like the perfect personality for politics, an arena where only the calm (or thick-skinned) survive. Actors, on the other hand, can, and certainly do, use their neuroses in their work. As the film director Mike Newell was later to say: 'Alan is neurotic but

intense, incredibly focused and authoritative as an actor. All his insecurities as a person are completely healed by acting.'

Certainly it was impossible to imagine the mean-spirited, calculating Slope, forever in pursuit of rich widows and richer livings, as having a stable home life. Obadiah was anybody's, if they were wealthy enough. But Alan's remote air gives him an unattainable quality, which makes him a challenge; hence the intense female interest in him.

As the theatrical agent Sheridan Fitzgerald, his former leading lady at the RSC, remarks: 'Women are always falling in love with the unattainable.'

'Alan's too serious to be flirtatious,' says Jules Wright. 'He's not aware of his attractiveness, which of course is what makes him really sexy on stage. He's very grunge to look at in his private life, he doesn't run around flashily at the Ivy,' she adds, referring to the famous showbusiness restaurant in London's West End.

Rickman slops around in blue jeans and polytechnic-lecturer jackets in real life, looking deliberately downbeat. With his hair brushed forward over his forehead, he is almost unrecognisable. There are times when he looks as if he shops at Oxfam, although Peter Barnes, whose only sartorial concession to his own success has been to grow a beard, playfully points out that 'if he dresses down, he dresses down very expensively these days. But he's more or less the same Alan.'

'You won't find Alan guzzling champagne in some nightclub or driving a fast car,' says another friend, drama-school principal Peter James. 'He's like Bob Geldof - scruffy, yet asking serious questions.'

The forces of political correctness maketh the New Man, of course, and actor Christopher Biggins has the feeling that Alan is '. . . snobby. I often see him at dos and I think he looks like a maths teacher. He comes across as a sexual animal; you feel he's going to be brilliant in bed. But you

wouldn't think he's an actor. There's no reaction. No sense of humour. Of course, he may be very, very nervous.'

(And with Mr Biggins - who has quite an edge to him under that jovial exterior - glowering at the apparent reincarnation of his least favourite teacher, who can blame him? But Biggins was right about the sexual aura, if a later remark by Rickman himself is anything to go by. 'Sitting around a table with good friends, some sympathy, nice wine, good talk, what could be better than that? Except sex? Or getting it right on stage,' he said, leaving us in little doubt how highly he placed sex as a priority. Because Rickman would never include any other leisure activity in the same order of importance as stage acting without meaning exactly what he said.)

'There is a chip on the shoulder. It doesn't surprise me that he was brought up on a council estate; so was I. But you either have a chip or you deal with it,' says Christopher, who makes no bones about being a true-blue Tory. 'These champagne socialists are very odd. I have a feeling that Alan surrounds himself with a close circle who are very protective. Some people don't want fame. They like it; but they don't want it,' he adds shrewdly.

Rickman's first property purchase back in 1989 was a spacious maisonette, part of an elegant Italianate terrace of Victorian houses in west London's fashionable Westbourne Grove. In 2001, he sold up and moved on to an even larger flat nearby. When he can, he pops over to France to a holiday cottage.

Until his mother's death in 1997, he lived just three tube stops away from her neat council house, only a few streets from Wormwood Scrubs prison with a bingo palace, DIY superstore and snooker hall nearby. His mother and younger brother Michael bought this trim semi-detached home together under the Right To Buy scheme introduced by the Tories and deplored by all Old Labourites. Alan visited her regularly; he has always had a good relationship with his

family, even though he keeps those two worlds separate most of the time.

Though he would always see his mother, he seems to find it difficult to come to terms with his background, to fit his family into his life as an actor.

His elder brother, David, works for a graphic design company and Michael is a professional tennis coach. They live quiet and modest lives far away from showbusiness circles, though they get on well with the famous member of the family.

‘Class has been a bizarre accident that happened to Alan,’ observes Stephen Davis. ‘We were the post-Beatles generation: we invented ourselves. Alan’s background is a major influence on him, though. He moves in a privileged world but refuses to forget his past. He wants to be sure that he’s not confused in his own shaving mirror about who he is.’

Peter Barnes has a different perspective: ‘My own feeling is that Alan has created himself. The persona has created him; the mask becomes the face. His family look very different. Actors have created themselves, they know exactly who they are. I haven’t got the same confidence he’s got on the phone, but then everyone recognises his voice because most actors have distinctive voices. Whereas I always feel I have to introduce myself by saying, “It’s Peter, Peter Barnes.”’

Another friend, Blanche Marvin, agrees: ‘Alan likes to feel he’s his own creation.’ In other words, this fiercely independent man won’t be beholden to anyone.

In some ways Rickman is a man born out of his time: there’s a dark and disturbing retro glamour about this saturnine actor that really fires up an audience’s imagination.

He’s the antithesis of the bland boy-next-door with an Everyman persona, with whose unthreatening ordinariness millions of movie-goers will identify. And costume roles

particularly suit Rickman because of that air of patrician superiority. It goes with the sometimes frightening looks that recall a well-known portrait of the writer, scholar and intriguer Francis Bacon whose unblinking gaze was once likened by a contemporary observer to the stare of a watchful viper.

In an age that lets it all hang out, Rickman is famous for giving audiences more fun with his clothes on. And this despite the fact that, back in 1983, he let it all hang out in a nude scene for Snoo Wilson's play *The Grass Widow*, later recalling, 'It was a very strange thing to do. You have to pretend that it's not happening to you.' Because of that very public early lesson in the vulnerability of standing on stage with no clothes on, he is a past-master at portraying the art of sensual anticipation and sexual control. In fact, Rickman's Valmont, a role for which he seemed to have been waiting all his life, was carefully based on a seventeenth-century rake he had played on stage with the disconcerting name of Gayman.

'He looks like a Russian Borzoi dog, one of those silent wolfhounds with a long neck and silky white coat. You always wonder whether you should speak to a Borzoi, as well . . .' says Peter James. 'It's his frame and physical look, a quality of stillness. It reminds me of some astonishingly aristocratic faces I saw in Russia, who looked as if they came from a different race.' How appropriate, then, that he should later take on the role of Rasputin.

Yet, for all his air of seigneurial self-control, he has big vulnerabilities. Alan was born with a tight jaw, hence the slightly muffled drawl: it must be one of the sexiest speech defects in the business. 'He doesn't have an active up-and-down movement of his jaw,' says Blanche Marvin, a former drama teacher.

'It's the way that he's generally physically co-ordinated: he has a lazy physical movement and a lazy facial movement. He's big-boned, and it's hard for him to move in

a sprightly way.’ Hence his lifetime’s obsession with trying to move with the fluidity of a Fred Astaire.

Despite the working-class upbringing, that honeyed-buzzsaw voice was perfected at private school: Latymer Upper in Hammersmith, also Hugh Grant’s Alma Mater.

Rickman, a clever child, won a scholarship there at the age of eleven. The process of reinventing himself, of keeping his past at arm’s length, began as English teacher Colin Turner became his mentor, much as the playwright Ben Jonson, stepson of a bricklayer, was ‘adopted’ by his teacher Camden. Alan was only eight when his father died of cancer, and Turner filled that gap in his life.

Latymer Upper has been almost as great an influence upon his life as Rima continues to be. He is emotionally attached to the place that gave him such a superior start.

In the autumn of 1995, this former star pupil had a minor falling-out with his old school when he refused to allow his photograph to be used in a recruitment drive. His political convictions simply wouldn’t allow him to publicly endorse a private, fee-paying education. Rickman melodramatically asserts that he was born ‘a card-carrying member of the Labour Party’, but he only finally joined in 1987 after he and Rima had enjoyed a relatively frivolous youth in CND.

Rumours attach themselves like barnacles to Alan Rickman, who is famously economical with the facts about himself. There was once a wild story that this friend of former Cabinet Minister Mo Mowlam and millionaire Labour supporter Ken Follett was a member of Vanessa and Corin Redgrave’s Workers’ Revolutionary Party. Yet Rickman is far too straight and astute to get involved with the lunatic fringe. He is an idealist, but he’s also startlingly pragmatic.

Rima, an economics lecturer at Kingston University (formerly Polytechnic) in Surrey, who took early retirement in 2002 at the age of 55, is a Labour councillor and former prospective parliamentary candidate for Chelsea, the safest

Tory seat in the country . . . hence her defeat in the 1992 General Election.

She subsequently endured the indignity of losing another battle. Despite the fact she was selected as Labour's candidate for the Mayoral elections in Kensington and Chelsea in 2001, friends now believe she is no longer looking for a safe Labour seat in Parliament but has forced herself to be philosophical. She still looks young enough to stand for election; Rima and Alan are a striking couple who could pass for a decade younger than they are. Not having had any children probably helps; so, too, does Rickman's thick, dark-blond hair, which for years he wore slightly long.

It is Rima who dictates the political and intellectual agenda. This is borne out by Peter Barnes, who recalls Alan deferring to his girlfriend's greater judgement when the two men met up at the funeral of the director Stuart Burge. After the service, Peter started raging on about the 'iniquities' of Tony Blair's New Labour government, but Rickman refused to take the bait. 'I'm very Old Labour and I think Alan is. At least, I hope he is. But he got very defensive at that point,' remembers Peter, 'and said that it was more Rima's area.' Alan, who graduated from two art colleges with diplomas in art, design and graphic design, is the creative one; Rima is the academic one of the two.

Rickman is very far from being the humourless grouch that his famously cross-looking demeanour suggests. Always droll, he has mellowed a lot over the years as success has given him more confidence. His sense of humour alone would have kept him out of the paranoid ranks of the WRP, which seemed to expend most of its energies on slagging off other far-Left groups.

'He's a bit of a Wellington with his ironic bon mots and his raised eyebrows,' says Stephen Poliakoff. 'He's self-critical and he doesn't have a naturally sunny disposition. But he's very life-enhancing, despite the pessimism: it's a curious combination. People find his dangerous wit attractive. He's

quite lugubrious, but he's also quite teasing. Some people find him intimidating, but he just has to be provoked out of a pessimistic view of the world.

'Acting is very serious for him, but he's more relaxed now. He loves to talk. He likes to feel things are controlled; he doesn't like to feel too exposed.'

In his fifth decade, at times Rickman resembles the late Frankie Howerd, especially when his large, crumpled face is split by a great pumpkin-head grin.

One of the more endearing aspects of Alan Rickman, who is not an immediately cuddly person, is that he has never bothered to get his crooked and discoloured bottom teeth fixed. When he became a Hollywood star at a relatively late age, it didn't go to his head (or his teeth).

'He was never one of the lads,' according to his old friend, the theatre producer Patrick (Paddy) Wilson. Alan has no interest in the stereotypical male pursuits of pubs and sports, hence his vast number of close female friends.

'New writing and politics are his life. He has no car, no interest in sport,' says Peter Barnes, although Alan watches Wimbledon out of loyalty to his tennis-coach brother Michael. 'He's interested in politics and the wider world,' says Stephen Poliakoff.

All this may make him sound like the career woman's ideal consort, yet he surprisingly admits that he had to have male feminism knocked into him; he was once a primitive model.

Now, surrounded by a seraglio that includes the actresses Juliet Stevenson and Harriet Walter, the comedienne Ruby Wax and the impresario Thelma Holt, he is everyone's theatrical agony uncle. 'He's got the widest circle of friends and acquaintances I have ever known,' says Peter Barnes. 'In the theatre, he unites opposites - because he knows so many people.'

'The only person I know who has more friends than him is Simon Callow,' says Jenny Topper, Artistic Director of

London's Hampstead Theatre and a friend of Alan's since 1981.

'It feels nice to be around him. He has a very loyal group of female friends: not a harem, but very intense. Alan is very loyal, very protective and very kind. He has strong views. He listens: he has that concentration, hence the female friends. He's also very proper: he cares about fans at the stage door and those who seek his advice and support.

'That gliding movement of his is almost balletic,' adds Jenny of the man who would be Fred Astaire. 'He's a great comic actor: the secret is timing. But his humour is very dry: he doesn't suffer fools gladly.'

'I associate him with complete integrity,' says Harriet Walter. 'He is a central figure in a lot of people's lives. He's not a guru as such; I don't think of him as a saintly, priestly person. It's not all grovelling at the feet of the effigy. He just makes you laugh. He's like a good parent . . . there's a feeling that Alan won't let you get away with things.

'He can be intimidating, though he doesn't realise how much. But there are precious few people whose judgement you trust, and he is one of them. I do argue with him; we don't always agree. He has pretty tough standards, but he's a very good listener. He takes you seriously, you feel encouraged.'

'Actors are always being judged on their physical qualities, which makes them very vulnerable,' says Stephen Poliakoff. 'And Alan has big vulnerabilities.'

'This business gives you the impression you have to be a pretty boy and be successful before you're thirty in order to succeed,' says Royal Shakespeare Company head Adrian Noble. 'Alan Rickman was never a pretty boy and was not successful before he was thirty.

'He never courted success, but his success now gives people hope in a society that adores youth in a rather sickening and dangerous fashion. It's very good news for those who are not the prettiest people in the world. It gives

people hope, that Alan was a play-reader at a tiny Fringe theatre like the Bush and all those other things, before he became famous.

'He has a good mug: that big nose. You need a big nose and big hands to be a good actor: look at Michael Gambon. And in the Green Room, Alan is always surrounded by women.'

Ah, yes. One can't get away from the women in the Alan Rickman Factor. When he played a licentious Caesar in Peter Barnes' 1983 radio play *Actors*, Rickman received more ardent letters from teenaged girls than for any of his other roles.

However, it was the Vicomte de Valmont that first made his name on both sides of the Atlantic, establishing that all-important, crowd-pleasing quality of sexual danger.

Lindsay Duncan, his co-conspirator in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, said wryly to Allison Pearson in the *Independent on Sunday* in 1992: 'A lot of people left the theatre wanting to have sex, and most of them wanted to have it with Alan Rickman.' Of all the original RSC cast in Howard Davies' famous, much-travelled production, Rickman is the only one to have made it on the world stage. He was nominated for a Tony award, as was Lindsay; and it rankled heavily with Rickman when he lost the role in the 1988 film version *Dangerous Liaisons* to the younger (and balder but heavily bewigged) John Malkovich.

Instead, the real turning-point for Rickman came when he was offered the role of the German terrorist leader Hans Gruber in the Hollywood big-budget thriller, *Die Hard*. Alan's frightening degree of menace, allied to a fastidious humour, marked out a major stylist who outshone the film's star, Bruce Willis. Rickman became an international name overnight as a result of his first-ever movie, since when he has conducted a dangerous flirtation with screen villainy.

He could see himself falling into the trap of being typecast and deliberately changed pace with a performance of

tremendous warmth and sensitivity as the mischievous returning spirit of Juliet Stevenson's dead lover in Anthony Minghella's 1991 low-budget hit, *Truly Madly Deeply*.

It became Britain's answer to *Ghost*. And Rickman's wry, doomed romanticism in the role eventually led to his casting as Colonel Brandon in the highly successful, Oscar-winning *Sense And Sensibility*.

Truly Madly Deeply offered the closest insights yet into the real Rickman, capturing that quality of benign bossiness which those who know him find both endearing and exasperating. Close friends confirm that he is indeed the character he plays in the movie. It established Rickman and Stevenson as one of the great screen partnerships, building on a friendship that began at the RSC in the company of Ruby Wax.

With her irregular but arresting looks, the *jolie-laide* Juliet could almost be Rickman's twin. They are brother and sister in socialism, yet brigadier's daughter Stevenson is a left-winger from the right side of the tracks. It says much for Rickman's panache, however, that he always seems just as classy as she.

Rickman's next feature film was *Close My Eyes*, the story of an incestuous affair between a brother and a sister in which Alan took an uncharacteristically passive role as the heroine's cuckolded husband. Nevertheless, he still stole the show with an unforgettable combination of silent rage and vulnerability.

He returned to Hollywood to add another rogue to his gallery, the Sheriff of Nottingham, in 1991's *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves*. Rickman says he tried to make him 'certifiable and funny', in which enterprise he wildly succeeded. So hilariously flamboyant was he that the film's star Kevin Costner reputedly played the villain in the editing-suite and chopped a number of Rickman's scenes to try to correct the imbalance between lead and support. This was the role that established Rickman's 'dark and dirty'

attraction for millions of otherwise respectable females. Rickman's occasional flashes of camp only add to the intrigue of his personality.

Blanche Marvin, whose Hollywood producer daughter Niki acted in repertory theatre with Alan at Leicester back in 1975, describes Rickman as '... a very male man. So many men in the theatre are bisexual or homosexual, but Alan is intensely masculine'.

That feral charm and mesmeric hold over an audience marked him out for his role as Rasputin, an offer that had been hanging around in his life for a long time. His casting as the deranged monk with the malign influence over the last Tsarina of Russia once again attests to Alan Rickman's unique alchemy.

'He has very strange looks, not necessarily what you would cast as the romantic lead,' admits Carlton TV's Jonathan Powell, one of the first to spot his screen potential. He looks like a magus, which is why he has often been suggested for Shakespeare's capricious magician Prospero: a complex, tormented man whose nature is divided between the malign and the benign.

People talk of his so-called cold smoulder; his sharp features give him an alien look, despite the lush and passionate lips. At one stage, Steven Spielberg had him in mind to play the timelord Dr Who on American TV, but Rickman didn't want to be locked into a long-running series. He keeps his options wide open. Those spiky looks, however, plague him. He hates being judged on his appearance, arguing that an actor is a blank canvas on whom one ought to be able to paint a portrait of anyone. He himself is a living contradiction of that.

He is the most individual of performers, quite unique and inimitable. No one can clone Alan Rickman; no one approaches his qualities. He is instantly recognisable, and there is a piece of himself up there on the screen every time.

There is always an extra dimension to his characterisation that creates a mythic quality; like all the cinema greats, he has a very strong sense of self. Rickman has long fought an inferiority complex: once upon a time, he seemed like a misunderstood misfit from a classic fairy-tale, an ugly duckling who has been transformed into an attractive man by the flukes of an extraordinary career. He was not easily marketable; and he was in despair at ever achieving lasting success. It was twenty years a-coming.

As with all the best character actors, it took him time to grow into his face and learn his strengths. More than anything, maturity made a major star of Alan Rickman. The toy-boy syndrome among ladies of a certain age is much exaggerated. Grown women tend not to fall for pretty youths as a rule; they appreciate character and experience in a man.

‘In many ways, he’s a European actor,’ observes director Jules Wright. And there is a French expression that sums up the paradoxical appeal of life’s *jolies-laides*: ‘I like a little vinegar in my salad.’

Most assuredly, Alan Rickman is the astringent vinegar in the salad.

1. THE FAUSTIAN GIFT

'HE DOES HAVE this power and charisma,' says playwright Stephen Davis, one of Rickman's oldest friends. Alan, Rima and sometimes their friend Ruby Wax spend weekends with Stephen's family in Gloucestershire, a county where, according to Davis, the British class system is in its death throes. 'In *Die Hard* and *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves*, he was acting the cosmos off the screen and Hollywood was opening a five-lane highway to him.

'The thing about actors is that they have a tremendous effect on people: Alan does in particular. He has an extra effect which he is aware of, but which he isn't always planning. He has a huge sexual charisma, but in real life he doesn't aim for that effect at all. This is what makes his personality so complex. It's a bit Faustian, cutting both ways.

'When you talk to him, you feel there are a lot of notional audiences in his mind. You never catch him off-guard. He always knows his lines. It's a very actorly quality. It's like being the friend of some of the characters he plays.

'He is enigmatic, not least with his friends. Really, I should write a play about him. He's an important figure in the lives of all his friends, but one could do without the stardom bit. It would do him good to be less written about. When close friends become stars . . . All of us are leveraged on the amount of attention we get. And Alan can be contradictory, moody.

'When he has problems, he broods. He was doing an extraordinary number of mundane tasks at the bottom of my garden once, digging and so on, while he brooded about