

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Janet Suzman.

“Suzman is a major classical actress: she is also a born teacher... Beneath her flame-coloured hair, Suzman burned, and her students duly caught fire.”¹

These words are from a review of Janet Suzman’s contribution to the BBC Acting Series, where she showed her mastery of Shakespearean comedy. And she **is** the expert. She’s been honing her Shakespearean talents since 1962, when she made her London debut as Luciana in *The Comedy of Errors*. In the same year, she joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, and has since played Shakespearean heroines galore: Rosaline in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Kate in the *Taming of the Shrew*, Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Celia in *As You Like It*, Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*².

Cleopatra is one of Shakespeare’s most complex female roles. She is noble, but histrionic, a creature of contrasts and paradoxes. Suzman played her with elaborate eye makeup,³ with constant and violently shifting moods - a woman using her sexuality to manipulate Marc Antony.

Suzman is not only a Shakespeare expert. She has also performed in many other works, from Ibsen and Chekhov to Pinter and Brecht; from British television drama productions to major films such as *Nicholas and Alexandra*, for which she earned a Best Actress Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Czarina Alexandra.

She has also branched out into teaching, writing and directing. Here too, she’s won awards: best production award for *Death of a Salesman* and best Director award for her completely rewritten version of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

Although she left South Africa in 1959, her links have remained strong. She’s a Patron of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, where she directed John Kani in *Othello* in 1987. She’s also a Patron of UCT’s own Baxter Theatre, and directed *Hamlet* here in 2007.

Actor, writer, teacher, director –but, over the more than 40 years of her career, it is Cleopatra that stands out. Suzman’s version of Cleopatra has been called “the greatest in living memory.”⁴

In an interview in *The London Telegraph*, Suzman herself said⁵: “Cleopatra is the only queen in Shakespeare’s gallimaufry who is actually on a throne and has power – all the others are either demented or dethroned or the wives of kings. In fact, I’d go so far as to say she’s the most interesting role for a woman ever written.”

From the famous death scene: “Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me...” “I am Fire and Air; my other Elements I give to baser life.”

Suzman’s Cleopatra is dazzling. Beneath her flame-coloured hair, she burns, and we, in the audience, duly catch fire.

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Janet Suzman.

1. Nightingale, B., Review of Janet Suzman in "Acting in Shakespearean Comedy", The BBC Acting Series. *The London Times*.
2. NetIndustries LLC. *Janet Suzman Biography (1939-)*. 2010, Date Accessed: 13 December 2010; Available from: <http://www.filmreference.com/film/34/Janet-Suzman.html>.
3. Hickling, A., Kim Cattrall: Absolutely Fabulous. *The Guardian*, **2010**. 28 September
4. News, L.E.T. *Kim Cattrall and Jeffery Kissoon in Antony and Cleopatra*. 30 April 2010, Date Accessed: 13 December 2010; Available from: http://www.everymanplayhouse.com/News/Kim_Cattrall_and_Jeffery_Kissoon_in_Antony_and_Cleopatra/110.aspx.
5. Cavendish, D., Janet Suzman interview for *Antony and Cleopatra*. *The Telegraph*, **28 Sep 2010**.