

# NEWS

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## Dame Eileen Atkins: Actresses 'must work harder' to succeed

By Ian Youngs

Arts reporter

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**Dame Eileen Atkins has urged fellow actresses to create good parts for themselves rather than complaining about the lack of roles for women.**

Dame Eileen co-created TV shows *Upstairs Downstairs* and *The House of Eliott* as well as starring in *Cranford*, *Doc Martin* and *Sons and Lovers*.

She said "women have an infinitely tougher time than men" in acting.

"I just think that women have to work much harder and find stuff for themselves," she told BBC News.

Dame Eileen was speaking after receiving the Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts

at the UK Theatre Awards in London.

Best known for her on-screen roles, the Bafta-winning star also adapted Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs Dalloway for the big screen and played the novelist in 1991's *A Room of One's Own*.

She said: "I played Virginia Woolf twice, mainly because of my own instigation. One was a piece of work on my own, one was a piece of a work of a friend and I said, 'Oh come on let's do it, it's a good idea'.

"You have to look round and find some things to do yourself and not just say, 'Oh there aren't any roles'. Find a woman [to play]. If you can't write it, get somebody to write it for you, and get on and do it, I say."

One obstacle to women establishing acting careers comes when men take female roles in Shakespeare plays, she explained.

"I still don't like middle-aged men - anyone other than boys - playing the female parts in Shakespeare," she said. "That still really makes me furious. And I don't think women playing the male parts is worth the revenge."

She believes some theatres have returned to the Elizabethan custom of men playing female roles in recent years following the success of Mark Rylance, who played Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1999 and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* in 2012 and 2013.

"Oddly enough it didn't happen for years," Dame Eileen said. "Suddenly in the last 20 years - I guess because Mark Rylance is so brilliant at it, I must say... But it's a shame.

"Women have an infinitely tougher time than men in that profession. You have to be really good to make it as a woman. And it's just mean to take some of our parts away from us."

Dame Eileen said up-and-coming actresses should "hang in there" as they wait for their big break. "It's hard," she said. "It's very hard. I didn't get my first break until I was 32.

"Whatever it takes to stay there somehow - taking other jobs, doing all kinds of things - if you know and feel you're really good, just keep going."



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