

he Jewish actress who isn't afraid to speak out

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Just like her acting career, Maureen Lipman believes her job as an Israel advocate will last years.



Maureen Lipman Photo: Michal Roche Ben-Ami

Maureen Lipman may be the most famous actress you've never heard of. Despite appearing in dozens of hit international films, plays and television shows in the past four decades, Lipman's fame has largely been relegated to her home country, England. That alone may have been enough to earn Lipman the Tel Aviv University honorary doctoral degree she was awarded a few weeks ago – but the fact that she is one of England's most outspoken public Israel supporters certainly helped.

The degree, which was also awarded to nine others from diverse fields, was bestowed upon Lipman on June 7. In Israel from June for just over a week, she kept busy: Lipman gave two lectures at Tel Aviv University, one public and one master class for faculty and graduate students, as well as traveling around the country as part of TAU's Living Legacy Mission, in which British people who leave a bequest to the university in their will are honored with a nine-day tour. Both Tel Aviv University and the British Council coordinated the engagements.

With this latest honor, "I am actually Dr. Dr. Dr. Maureen Lipman, BA and MA, without ever having studied for a degree," she laughed. "It's come full circle. I think it might be time I went back to school."

To Lipman, the TAU degree was simply a great excuse to make another trip to the country she's spent so much time and energy defending in Britain's public eye. In England, her name is just as often in headlines for Israel advocacy as for her work. In May, Lipman made British news when she combated anti-Israel actor Roger Lloyd Pack in a radio interview about a boycott of Israel's Habima Theater Company, which was performing at Shakespeare's Globe.

"The underdogs have always interested me," says Lipman, who is also a political advocate for Burma, a nation long ruled by militias.

In show business, Lipman has also been the underdog.

Since her major debut in the 1968 British film *Up the Junction*, she has long played roles in projects that rarely left England, creating what she calls a "parochial career."

"I was never ambitious for an international stage. So when Tel Aviv University rang to tell me of the degree, I thought it was a joke," she says. "I said, 'How have you ever heard of me? I'm like Israeli wine – I don't travel well.'" Lipman grew up in Hull, a city in Northern England, where she was "a precocious child. I did impersonations; I was always on stage. I was a pain in the ass, I'm sure."

She attended the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, where, aside from invaluable acting coaching, she received advice that would shape much of her life: "The day I left drama school, my principal told me, 'You won't come into your own until you're 40.' I thought the man was crazy. Who ever heard of 40?" But he was right. Over the past 44 years, Lipman's career in English film and television grew slowly. She never exploded in a flash of celebrity or notoriety. And yet, through the decades, she worked steadily and built a solid, continuous career with key, exciting milestones.

Agony and Agony Again were the first British television series to picture a normal gay relationship, says Lipman, the show's star.

Her biggest breakthrough came in 2002, when she played Adrien Brody's mother in Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*. The film was nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award, and won Best Director and Best Actor (Brody). Lipman herself won a Polish Film Award for Best Supporting Actress for the role. For an actress with such longstanding ties to Israel, the success of the film carried significant weight.

Those ties stretch all the way to Lipman's childhood. Growing up, "Israel meant the little blue and white [tzedakah] boxes in the corner of the room," she says.

"We sang about the land of milk and honey. There was always a 'next year in Jerusalem.'" She first visited Israel at 16 on a teen trip with B'nai B'rith International.

"Since then, it's always been a question of how to get back – either having a holiday here, or writing about Israel or just giving my kids an idea of what it means to me," she says.

There was no set date when her second, unofficial career took off. But Google her name, and it's apparent that her current role as Israel defender is in full swing. Her job, as she sees it, is simply to level the playing field.

"There are too many bigots and extremists using anti-Zionism as a cloak for anti-Semitism," she says. "And they are whipping up a frenzy."

Lipman recalls a recent meeting to raise funds for Burma. When the floor was open to discussion, a journalist spoke up blaming Israel for the militarized, oppressive situation in that country.

"It's at points like that where I know the scapegoat has once again been found," she says. "For someone to actually blame Israel for 40 years of military dictatorship in Burma – it's obvious."

While Lipman is open to criticism of Israel, most of her arguments have risen when Israel is singled out on an international level when other countries' transgressions are arguably worse.

"Why is there no one protesting outside the Syrian embassies all over the world?" asks Lipman. "They are killing their own people, not defending their right to exist. I don't understand how people can criticize the Jewish state on a different plane than they criticize similar situations in the rest of the world."

In England, she says, she nearly stands alone. She cites actor Steven Berkoff and writer Howard Jacobson as compatriots in defending Israel; but much more common, she says, are those singling out Israel while virtually ignoring the human rights issues of other nations.

"These people are very happy to sit next to a Chinese filmmaker, in spite of the fact that they execute hundreds of people a year. They are very happy to sit next to [President of Zimbabwe] Robert Mugabe despite the fact that he works to deny AIDS medicine," says Lipman. "People in England are only obsessed with the question of the Palestinians."

Just like her acting career, Lipman believes her job as an Israel advocate will last years.

"I will forever be yakking to someone about Israel," she says. "I can't shut up."