



**FIERCERIVALS**  
Lily James and Gillian Anderson star in a stage version of the classic Fifties movie starring Bette Davis



*The best ever portrait* of female rivalry? Nothing comes close to *All About Eve*, Joseph Mankiewicz's 1950 Oscar-winning masterpiece about the aging Broadway star usurped by her scheming, younger protégée. Starring Bette Davis and Anne Baxter, it still, after all these years, manages to press every single button. What a treat that it is to be reprised, nearly 70 years later, on the London stage with Gillian Anderson as Margo Channing and Lily James as Eve Harrington, the fan who becomes

her seemingly mousy PA. James will be perfect as Harrington, whose character was described by Davis and Baxter's co-star, Celeste Holm, as having "the manners of an ambassador and the morals of a pirate". Anderson will nail it as the spoiled but generous Margo, suffering the ignominy of being "not twenty-ish... not thirty-ish, but 40 years old. Four-zero" (although they might have to change that line, Anderson being 50, and a very youthful-looking 50 at that).

Female rivalry. Youth pitted against age. Two such incendiary touchstones. On the face of it, none of it should chime so. Not when 40 is supposedly the new 20, nor when we are all, courtesy of #thesisterhood, so fiercely supportive of each other. As former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, once said, "There is a special place in hell for women who don't

support other women". Isn't that old 'only room for one woman at the top' trope just a tool of patriarchal suppression? And anyway, who says men aren't vicious to each other too? ('All About Adam' - now there's a thought.)

And yet... Why does the sympathy we feel for Margo, the inward cheering when she utters those immortal words, "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night", as she rages against the prospect of being sidelined, feel so, um, contemporary? What is it about Eve, who starts out as a doormat and ends up as her boss's arch rival, that doesn't seem 'period' at all? Is it because humans are suckers for Things That Are Not What They Initially Seem (the plot of any good thriller always depends on it)? Or because it so deftly plays into the myth that women, unlike men, have a sell-by date, ergo, the older woman is always the victim and the younger woman, whether she likes it or not, is the ambitious scheming bitch.

'Twas ever thus, and 'twill ever be, is the Darwinian way of looking at it. As long as men can stay fertile until they die and we cannot, the subject of female rivalry will remain deliciously relevant. What of the trope though, of passing the baton on; of, in a parallel universe, Bette Davis's character being delighted by Eve's initiative, and thrilled to now have the time to, say, write her memoirs. Short boring play, I agree, but a possibly radical step for the cause. *All About Eve* runs at London's Noël Coward Theatre until May 19, 2019

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**THEATER**

## friend or foe?

WORDS BY CHRISTA D'SOUZA

A stage production of the movie classic *All About Eve*, starring Gillian Anderson and Lily James, depicts how savagely women can compete with each other. But in a post-#MeToo era of female solidarity, why do we still enjoy the drama of fierce female rivalry?