

# RODDICK PARADOX

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

It's hard not to be engulfed by Anita Roddick's whirlwind. Anyone who has the remotest interest in human rights must end up seduced by her passion, commitment, lust for life and honesty.

In Britain, the woman who started The Body Shop, the ethical beauty business with attitude, courts controversy primarily for not fitting neatly into one of her own reusable bottles.

How can it be that this maverick entrepreneur, a multi-millionaire many times over – wearing in this instance combat trousers and a T-shirt – really puts at the heart of her empire the need and will to do good, to change the planet? How can she stay true to the sixties ideals on which she was nurtured and make profits?

Anita Roddick, who makes an obvious choice as guest speaker at the Saturday Star/Femina Woman of Courage awards, is an intensely engaged woman who is equally contradictory. She is upfront, says what's on her mind, responds intuitively and has created, with her 1850 stores that have opened since 1976, the 27th most recognised brand in the universe. While in the country, Roddick will open up local branches – including one in Sandton City and Menlyn Shopping Centre – of the Body Shop. On Wednesday she will present the Woman of Courage award. The finalists are Florence Masebe, Alix Carmichele, Aneesa and Shamima Vally, Natalie du Toit, Cynthia Levitt, Julia Leleka, Princess Sibusile Zulu and Asha Ramlal.

On meeting Roddick, you immediately get a sense that her activism is a natural outcropping of her life as an "agitator" and "renegade" (words she uses to describe herself), a business leader uncomfortable in a traditional role and as a result a mould-breaker, someone whose business *raison d'être* has been to put idealism into the industry agenda. In the public mind she has always been associated with issues close to her heart – social responsibility, human rights, the environment, animal protection and an "absolute belief in community trade". She has been called impetuous and difficult, and no doubt is – you get a sense of that – but then she's never claimed to be perfect, and you cannot have done what she's done without focus and determination.

Roddick is the daughter of Italian immigrants, born in Littlehampton, West Sussex, where she still lives, rooted to the community, which is also part of her work-life ethos. The Body Shop serves over 77-million customers in 49 countries, although it started out in the English seaside town of Brighton as something to generate a bit of cash when she was a young mother of two. Her husband Gordon is also her partner.

At the first shop she lay a scented trail of strawberry essence on the pavement to lure people in. Her mother's frugality, a hang-over from the war, made Roddick question retail conventions. Why not re-use a container? Her activism was born out of ideas like these.

Perhaps all this comes more naturally to Roddick than one might imagine. Her parents owned a café, which provided breakfast for the local fisherman. At some point her father, who died when she was 10, converted the coffee bar into an American-style diner, with a great sense of theatre, the importance of which has never left her. It also taught her that "it is possible to bring your heart to the workplace".

Other lessons that she learnt come from her mother, a "cantankerous" 87-year old – she told me in good humour – who instilled in her daughter the need to challenge everything and defy mediocrity.

Roddick was a teacher before heading off in her 20s for a two-year world tour, which included South Africa in the sixties, and a spell in custody for violating the regulations of apartheid. This will be her first trek back, although she has travelled all over the world since then.

For her, entrepreneurs are "delinquents", who need to be in control, and are obsessed with freedom. If she had an MBA thesis it would be that trading is really the essence of



**The Body Shop Maverick amassed mega-profits, but her motivation was alleviating poverty and uplifting society**



Photographs: DAVID SANDISON



Being apart from the system gives you enormous power because you are observing from the outside

organisations. The only people who really understand poverty are the poor. So, you make them the leaders and advisors. If the struggle against poverty is to be won, it is through supporting small-scale local economic initiatives.

"I'm a great believer in the local economy. For us that is the real antidote to the globalised behaviour of a multinational."

In Nicaragua, Roddick met a woman who doesn't earn a living wage and works for a South Korean factory that makes products for the US market, for companies that Roddick feels exploit the poor. The woman took Roddick back to her hovel and asked her to tell the world that all she wanted was to be "moved from slavery to poverty".

These stories inspire Roddick, who has received dozens of honorary degrees and awards, lectured at Stanford University and campaigned to Save the Whale with Greenpeace in 1986. In 1993, she campaigned to raise awareness of the Ogoni people and their leader Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was persecuted for protesting against Shell and the Nigerian dictatorship over exploitation of their homeland.

Roddick believes the anti-globalisation movement has turned it into the biggest grassroots peace movement ever.

"And it's coming from people of the developing world, the poor and disenfranchised" says Roddick. Now, however, it has been "too corralled by the anarchists", she thinks, and she has distanced herself from it.

"They don't have the voice of the developing world movement, the pro-justice movement or the environmental movement. Their agenda is through physical violence."

By her own admission she doesn't laze around much, her house is always full of people engaged in one or other cause. She loves wine and food, decorating her houses, and wearing beautiful clothes, although she is always pushed into the box of radical activist and plays to it. Yet her "spiritual path" means that she will eventually give all her money away. For her wealth comes with responsibility. She believes in the great socialist principles of redistribution.

"There's a great sense of joyous abandonment when you know you've got it and you're going to off-load it."

Her daughters, Justine and Samantha, now in their 30s and community activists themselves, will get a trust fund and the houses Gordon and Anita own. All the other money will go to The Body Shop Foundation, another of Roddick's initiatives

formed in 1990 to raise money and support worldwide grassroots organisations.

When I ask her if she is harder on women than men, her immediate response is no. Then you see Roddick in action.

"Let me think about that". And

the no turns into a maybe, and finally to a yes. She does get angry at women for not reading enough, or shopping at the American supermarket chain Wal-Mart, because she believes they use sweatshop labour, and she will break with any friend who shops there.

At present things are in a state of flux. The business is up for sale, although as yet there have been no official offers. Flagging sales and currency problems forced the organisation, which now has many imitators, to face the fact that they had to change, to re-invent. Three years ago, Roddick stepped back from line management and brought in a new CEO, Patrick Gournay.

This has been a great source of pain for Roddick, who has been marginalised.

The reality is, though, that her baby doesn't need her any more.

Roddick's legacy has been substantial. She has in part helped change the face of ethical retailing.

"I'm not so stupid as to think that there's going to be a social Utopia but my entire purpose has been to eliminate poverty."

Not a bad goal, even though it may seem that it is impossible.

Her voice of dissent has been heard.

■ The awards ceremony will be held on November 21 at the Bette David Hall in Morningside. Bookings are still open. For more information phone Suzanne Weil at (011) 804-1485.

## SATURDAYStar FEMINA WOMAN of COURAGE

life, and also an activity she loves. Give her a souk or a marketplace over an anodyne American mall any day.

Her parents, being immigrants, left her with the impression that she was an outsider; as a result she will not be dictated to by the system. "Being apart gives you enormous power," says Roddick, "because you are observing from outside."

"This is increasingly true of women who are leaving the business world because they're not comfortable with the male hierarchical values. Women prefer flatter structures. They are more seamless, like a vat of water with some oil in it; they just move and meander around."

As does Roddick, who meanders from one topic to another, barely finishing a sentence, but, as she herself admits constantly "vomiting up" ideas.

At 59, she has, she says, become more radical with age, rather like her mother, who introduced her to her husband Gordon in 1970, at the El Cubana club that she had

opened.

While Gordon plays golf, Roddick instead wants everything she does now to have a sense of "terrorism about it". She has always been the same, only The Body Shop has given her a world platform on which to do it. She is "pathologically optimistic", a perkiness which she puts down to eating tomatoes.

Her company has come under many barages from the press, who can't square all the contradictions, and possibly can't deal with her success. The way she sees it is that

it would be easier if she just sold cosmetics. The accusations have been that she cannot really be true to her ideals and not sell out, although it is an over-simplification to say she is against profits. She isn't.

"If we really wanted to maximise our profits we would make anti-ageing creams. But I don't believe in dream creams. It's a lie." She gets really animated. Already her legs are wrapped around her body as she sits in her chair in her office at The Body Shop headquarters in Arundel. Now her voice pitches up an octave.

"I used to say to the cosmetics industry, which upset them terribly, that women who bought anti-ageing creams were god's way of defining who was really stupid. These creams are now more expensive than gold."

"The notion that you can get rid of 30-40-50 years of arguing with your husband is crazy. Or that you can rub stuff on your thighs and watch them disappear is pathetic. When you get to my age, your face, well, it's the pattern of life. But there is so much you can do for the body."

Perhaps the most obvious contradiction is that Roddick runs a global empire yet is fiercely anti-globalisation. She defines her company as multi-local. Her husband came up with the idea for "self-financing" shops, which is how the franchise network grew and spread across the world, run mostly by "mom-and-pop" organisations.

As for the ingredients, she sources them from as many producer-farmers as she can, which means she won't always buy the cheapest, preferring to support grassroots