

# THE NATURAL

Anita Roddick still believes – in community, in people, in The Body Shop. Australian writer Rachael Oakes-Ash meets her teenage idol

Photography Gavin Smith





Body Shop founder Anita Roddick once revealed her pubic hair to get a recipe.

**T**HE BODY SHOP HEADQUARTERS JUST OUTSIDE the seaside town of Arundel in England has a motorway exit all of its own, but you would be forgiven for thinking you'd taken the wrong turn when you stumble upon this pagoda-style theme park.

I don't know what I expected when I was summoned here to interview the company's founder, Anita Roddick. Maybe an open-plan farmhouse filled with workers in caftans trading trinkets with the local African migrants, or a sleek glass and steel structure housing accountants, spin doctors and image makers? Certainly not an Asian-style corporate office block by the sea.

I grew up with my feet swathed in peppermint foot lotion, my hair dripping in banana conditioner and my skin glistening with cocoa butter. The Body Shop brought the kitchen to my bathroom and informed me of the plight of the whales, Third World countries and the three billion women being persecuted by eight supermodels. Its trade-not-aid philosophy made so much sense.

Anita Roddick was a goddess, an eco-warrior. I religiously bought pumice and perfumed bath bombs, signed in-store petitions to save the world and gave Body Shop gift baskets to my family every Christmas. I've since moved on, taken in by the promise of 100 per cent pure, organic, no artificial colourings, flavourings or animal testing of the now elite spectrum of products on the market originally inspired by Roddick's range. Products whose ludicrous prices instil in me a sense of achievement. I am sad to say the only petitions I now sign are mailing lists updating me on new products launched each month.

It's been a long time since I set foot inside a Body Shop and I wonder if Anita Roddick is as tired as I envision her products to be in the wake of Lush, Aveda and Red Earth. I feel ashamed that I have turned my back on The Body Shop as I enter Roddick's temple, its foyer adorned with affirmations, statistics on world poverty and a new range of hemp balms and lotions.

Two of Roddick's assistants lead me into her office where a triangular table is encircled by boxes of nuts, pebbles and what looks like grass. Roddick is short, verging on petite, and dressed in designer fatigues in varying shades of green. "My, you're short," I utter, the words tumbling out before I have time to



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writer Rachael Oakes-Ash

think. "I love your accent," Roddick responds and I like her instantly. It's not a compliment you hear too often as an Australian in London. Not many 59-year-old grandmothers could effortlessly carry off the Maharashi pants worn by Posh, Gwyneth and Naomi, but then Roddick isn't like other grandmothers. She's been hit with tear gas while protesting at the World Trade Organisation conference in Seattle, exposed her pubic hair to a tribe of amused Africans in return for their molasses perfume recipe and saved 20 Ogoni protesters sentenced to death in Nigeria.

**T**WENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, RODDICK opened the first Body Shop in Brighton with the support of a local businessman who offered her £8,000 (about \$22,000) in return for a large chunk of future profits – now worth £145 million. Two years later, Roddick launched the first franchise in Brussels. Today, there are more than 1,800 stores in 39 countries – all committed to community trade and environmental and social issues.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing. Roddick has battled with the company's board and endured prolonged muckraking at the hands of the British media. The share price slumped in the 1990s following allegations of fraud and questions were posed about the sincerity of the company's ethical stance. They won a libel action and an injunction to stop the broadcast of a television documentary outlining the allegations. The saga affected customer perception, but Roddick remained indefatigable.

"When you get to my age – late 50s, early 60s – the deep questions are, 'What have you done, what have you left behind?' and I have added to that, 'How are you heard?'" Roddick says. "We desperately need to be heard. Women my age are no longer seen as having a function, we can no longer have kids, visually you are not young, so on to the trash heap of life you go, so the need to be heard is more important than the need to be visually acceptable."

It's comforting to know that a woman who launched commercial eco-trade and *The Big Issue* newspaper, which is sold by the homeless, still wonders if she has done enough. Could Roddick's desire to be heard be the motivation behind her new book, *Take It Personally*, an anti-globalisation tome featuring articles by Naomi Klein, Ralph Nader, Greenpeace and activist Maude Barlow? Roddick's first book since her international bestseller, *Business As Unusual*, is a timely publication. The original cover featured a photograph of President George W Bush emblazoned with his statement: "One of the great things about books is sometimes there are some fantastic pictures."

The cover has since been pulled in light of recent events. But for a man who likes pictures in his books, President Bush won't be pleased with the images within these pages. The American flag is defaced in some and used to illustrate the stranglehold of the West on world poverty in others. There are disturbing images of skeletal Sudanese children scavenging for insects to eat, wildlife drowning in oil from environmental disasters in the UK, open drains bursting with rubbish in India and Seattle's masked riot

police. I express my concern that we've become anaesthetised to such imagery and that it has lost its power to shock.

"I don't think we see these images enough," replies Roddick. "We just flick through them, we don't stand and study them like we study ourselves in the mirror. We study what that particular woman is wearing in the street with much more detail. I think we have a real spiritual poverty and poverty of imagination. We don't have an education system that teaches not only wonder and awe but a sense of social justice. It just teaches you to be passive, it doesn't teach you to stand up and shout or take things further at all. You have to keep your mouth open and get down that conveyor belt into a job that perhaps you don't get anyway.

"We've got an amazing culture of comfort, we've got thousands of ads saying, 'Buy, buy, buy', 'What you look like is everything, what you wear is everything'. The notion of community has disappeared, the protection of community, celebration of community and relationships. It's not that it's difficult to get it back, it's that there is no sexy way to get it back. How do you take issues like child poverty and sweatshops and make them sexy?"

Roddick is skilled at making products sexy. The Body Shop promotional poster for its fake tan lotion featured a toned man in a pair of swimmers with a bottle of the product placed suggestively down the front of his togs. Pensioners in UK shopping malls were reported to have fainted at the sight. Mattel threatened to sue her for her use of the reclining Ruby – a naked, "overweight" Barbie doll look-alike – for her body-image awareness campaign. The provocative statement, "There are three billion women in the world who don't look like supermodels and only eight who do", was plastered on T-shirts and posters.

"Our legal department was a bit timid so we changed her to one that stood up and was proud. Then she was banned in the bus transit of Hong Kong because it was seen as distasteful even though she was next to [underwear chain] Victoria's Secret, which shows cantilever brassieres with breasts spilling over the sides."

As Roddick talks, she constantly plays with her copper-wire hair, fluffing it up around her temples and pulling it forward. For a moment I think she's trying to hide scars from a rumoured facelift but as I study her more closely, I realise her trademark mane is thinning and I silently admonish myself.

**S**INCE ITS PEAK IN THE 1980S WHEN SHARES were worth £3.86 (about \$10) and the company valued at £800 million, the "green-thinking" Body Shop has dropped in value to £0.96 per share. But there are moves in place to lure back the market stolen by the competitors. Formerly opposed to advertising, The Body Shop has announced a new advertising campaign in Britain aimed at attracting the 20- to 30-somethings.

Gone are the wicker gift baskets with shredded cellophane, replaced by modern plastic cubes containing mini products. But the trademark Body Shop green remains – a colour created by Roddick because it covered the stains on the walls of her first store. Bizarrely, The Body Shop doesn't stock Roddick's books on a regular basis. They display them when they first launch,



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then they are removed from the shelves. When I ask why, she instructs me to ask the board. When I question the Australian Body Shop head office, I'm assured that if a customer wants a book, the shop will order it in.

Roddick announced her intention to leave the company with her husband and co-chairman, Gordon, two years ago. When they do eventually sell, the couple stand to make millions from their 24 per cent stake in the company. She says, "It all depends on the price, it can go from £20 million to hundreds of millions and I don't even know if I want to sell. Do I want to still work? The integrity of the product, if I sell, is not debatable, it's institutionalised. We have articles of association saying what the company is dedicated to and by law you can't take that away."

**A**SK HER WHAT she intends to do after the sale and Roddick talks about working on various awareness campaigns including child labour, as well as a range of political issues. She talks of setting up her own publishing company and having her voice heard through her writing. This is a woman who intends to shout louder as she gets older.

"We have the Women's Institute here – the average age is 65 or older. They booed [Tony] Blair off the platform, they've done their sexy naked calendar, they demanded a change in the law for the use of medical marijuana. They are brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!

"They understand community, they support farming, they've been boycotting Esso-Mobil beyond anyone else, they are a true force. They're grandmothers, mothers, they're older people. When women free themselves from kids, they do reinvent themselves. My mum used to say when you are in your 30s and 20s, you want to feather your nest ... in your 40s you'll eliminate the shits in your life and just want to be surrounded by people you love."

I imagine I am one of these people as she offers me a lift to the train station via her West Sussex home. She drives a VW Golf Diesel because it is more environmentally friendly. She doesn't have a designated car space and we stand in the middle of the staff car park as she tries to remember where she's parked her car.

Her home reflects her personality and the mammoth fortune she has accumulated. It's spacious and welcoming. The expansive gardens are adorned with modern art and the driveway is lined with coloured marbles. A barn attached to the 16th century home has been restored and features exposed timber beams, bare boards and a mezzanine level for yoga and meditation. "This is where I hold my anti-globalisation and refugee crisis meetings with my friends Bono and Dave Stewart," says Roddick.

As she disappears upstairs to change, I am dying to sneak into



Roddick, at The Body Shop offices, intends to keep shouting louder as she gets older.

her bathroom to see if she uses Body Shop products, but instead I nose around her garden like a tourist and am caught out by her New Zealand housekeeper, Queenie. It turns out Roddick loves antipodeans. "When I envision what The Body Shop is about, it is Australia. Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Canada are brilliant," exclaims Roddick on her return. "In terms of my vision of how the business should be, they've honed it, they've made it better."

But ask her about human rights in Australia and she's not as upbeat. "Let them in!" she says of the refugees trying to get into Australia. "The most intelligent, creative, profitable people for any country are immigrants. They're outsiders, they work harder, they save more, the Caribbeans in this country, the Jews and the Italians in this country, economically have given more in terms of culture, ideas, business, whatever."

Back in London, I am aware I am walking the streets with Anita Roddick, OBE, my teenage hero and I wait for the crowds to approach, but they don't. Roddick says she does get recognised but when people approach her, it's usually to complain about a product being removed from the range. I kiss her goodbye as she hails a taxi in her Issey Miyake jacket and heads for her London townhouse and later a publisher's dinner in a five-star restaurant. I wander past an empty Body Shop store staffed by a bored teenager wearing clothes no doubt made in the sweatshops of Indonesia and I hope Anita lives forever. She's got a lot of work to do. □

Take It Personally: How Globalization Affects You And How To Fight Back is published by Thorsons, a HarperCollins imprint, \$32.95. Rachael Oakes-Ash is the author of Good Girls Do Swallow, published by Random House, \$21.90.