

ARRIVING AT NEW YORK'S

iconic Rockefeller Center as the breakout star of NBC's multi-million dollar prime time show, *Bionic Woman*, Michelle Ryan was greeted by hordes of adoring fans, all clamouring for an autograph from America's latest TV sensation. Once inside, celebrities and Hollywood bigwigs were equally keen to meet her, and as she mingled with Brooke Shields and accepted congratulations from *Lost* heartthrob Josh Holloway, she couldn't help but think how far she had come from the girl who sold tat on a market stall in a drab fictional London suburb.

The Enfield-born actress, well spoken and polite, grew up in front of the nation, spending the best part of her teen years portraying Zoe Slater in the biggest show on UK television. Her involvement in the show's plotlines of murder, pregnancy and sex kept her in tabloid headlines until her character ran away from Walford for the less depressing climes of Ibiza, after which Michelle carved a career path that led to the big screen. She starred in a host of British films, most notably alongside Carmen Electra in *I Want Candy*. Then in 2007, she succeeded where so many other aspiring British actresses have failed, by landing the lead part in a major new prime time US TV series. The big budget *Bionic Woman* - a re-imagining of the classic 1970s series of the same name - was well received, becoming the most successful premiere on NBC since 1999's *West Wing*, and earning ITV2 its largest ever audience when it was first shown in the UK. However, a combination of studio belt tightening and ferocious competition from rival networks consigned *Bionic Woman* to the history books after just one season.

After returning from her American adventure undeterred by its brevity, Michelle has continued to add to her impressively eclectic CV. Over the Easter weekend she made her debut alongside David Tennant in *Doctor Who*, playing mysterious jewel thief Lady Christina de Souza. Later this year, Michelle will take the lead in *Mr Eleven*, a two-part ITV drama about a teacher who is obsessed with marrying her eleventh partner.

On the set of her *ICON* photoshoot, Michelle spoke to us about her love of death defying stunts, her favourite football manager and why she will definitely not be making a soap comeback.

How was your *ICON* photoshoot?

Great fun, I really enjoy fashion-led shoots like this. I worked with the photographer Rafael Stahelin 18 months ago, and I think he's brilliant. I love his work, particularly the edgy black and white shots.

You've posed for *Arena* and always feature highly in *FHM*'s 100 Sexiest voting - are you comfortable with your sexy image?

A lot of it is down to good camera angles and lighting [laughs], but I suppose that image comes with the territory of being in the public eye. I'm comfortable with it, and I appreciate the attention.

We know you best as an actress. When were you first bitten by the acting bug?

I saw *Grease* in the West End when I was ten years old. Everyone looked like they were having such fun and I knew I wanted to be a part of something like that. Soon after, I went to a local drama group and got into improvisation and dance. I then went to an agency, and at 15 landed the part in *EastEnders*. I haven't looked back since.

Was it nerve-wracking to audition for *EastEnders* at such a young age?

I was going for a lot of parts at the time and I never thought I'd get *EastEnders*, so I wasn't really that nervous. It was only afterwards that I realised what a big deal it was.

Ever had a nightmare audition?

I once went for a part in a pop music

video, and halfway through the dance routine - in a room full of people - my trousers split. I had to slowly back out of the room, hoping no one would notice. I'd forgotten all about that experience until now though, thanks for reminding me.

You're welcome. How long did it take you to perfect an East End drawl?

I used to get the piss taken out of me at school because I actually pronounced my 'T's, so I gradually learned to drop them. By the time I auditioned for the show, I had a lot of practice of switching between the two accents.

How did it feel to leave the biggest series on UK television?

I definitely felt pressure to succeed, and there was the strain that comes with leaving something familiar, but I knew I was ready to move on. You never know what you can achieve unless you take a few chances.

Would you ever consider returning to Walford and the market stall?

No. I spent my teen years there, and I don't know anybody who wants to revisit those. It was a great foundation for my career, but I wouldn't want to go back. *Bionic Woman* gave you a big break in the United States. How did that role come about?

I was working on a film with Faye Dunaway in Cardiff [that'll be 2007 independent horror *Flick*], and drove down to London one morning to tape an audition for them. They liked what they saw, flew me out to LA and within a week I had the job.

We watched the episodes. The stunt and fight scenes looked like a lot of fun...

They really were. I've had the fortune to work within plenty of genres, but I definitely favour physical roles. Stuff that

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involves government conspiracies and plenty of action - like the *Bourne* franchise - really intrigues me.

What was your favourite stunt?

There was one in a museum where I leapt 50 feet down a wire, head first with my hands behind my back. Another favourite was one in a steelworks, where I had to jump 18ft and then punch someone through a wall.

Were you scared?

Not at all, I love doing my own stunts. In fact, there was one that involved jumping between buildings that I really wanted to do, but they said it was too dangerous. My American agent was quite relieved when they said no.

How do you keep in such good shape?

I run, I do yoga and I also dance. During *Bionic Woman*, my trainer kept me in shape with an athlete's regime, but after coming home I let my running slip to the extent that David [Tennant] recently beat me in a race. I thought, "That's it, I'm going to start running again. I cannot be beaten by a guy."

What did you miss most about England?

Aside from my friends and family, I really missed driving my little Mini Cooper around London. Out there, the roads are huge and daunting, and I had my own driver, so I missed the freedom of driving myself about.

What were the biggest differences between working on an American show and a British show?

It's just the scale of the entire operation - the studio sizes, the stunts and the overall budgets are on a whole different level. We did a scene for the promo on a street in LA where I stood on top of an overturned police car, surrounded by helicopters and fire engines. At that point, I really felt like I had arrived.

Did you live the life of a Hollywood star?

We shot the show in Vancouver, so I was a little detached from the Hollywood scene. There were always glitzy parties to attend, and they were great for networking, but I rarely had time for them

thanks to my schedule. There were some nice perks though - on the set I had a really big trailer, and a lovely place of my own in Vancouver. When I came home, I moved back in with my parents, where I still am today. Let's just say I'm ready to move on again.

Did you get recognised in the streets?

I did, and it took some getting used to. On a trip to New York, I arrived at my hotel and saw a huge group of autograph hunters waiting at the entrance. I remember thinking, "I wonder who they are here for?" and it turned out it was me! I was also placed under the scrutiny of the American media - one time I went shopping at a really nice vintage store, and found it strange to see pictures of it in the press the next day.

Had anyone in Vancouver or LA ever heard of *EastEnders*?

Yes, quite a few people were aware of it. Soaps are a daytime phenomenon in the States, so they seemed to be quite impressed by the high regard we give to *EastEnders* in the UK.

Was the American accent harder to master than cockney?

With American films and TV so heavily ingratiated in our culture, it was fairly easy to pick up, but I also had an excellent dialect coach, who would make me read magazines and books in the accent. After being surrounded by Americans for so long, it became quite natural, and my friends noticed that I occasionally slipped back into the accent when I came home.

Were you upset when *Bionic Woman* was cancelled?

We launched on 15 million viewers and the show generated huge excitement, but after the writers' strike, the studio couldn't afford to keep it going. I was disappointed because the show had so much potential, but I really enjoyed the experience and was glad that I was free to pursue other projects.

You've also done some stage work...

Yes, I played a journalist in the Toby

Young play *Who's the Daddy* [a 2005 King's Head theatre production based around the David Blunkett paternity case] and it was great fun. Broken toilets and slug trails on the walls of the cramped dressing rooms made it a very grounding experience, but the buzz of live performance and the sense of camaraderie were fantastic.

How was your recent *Doctor Who* experience?

I absolutely loved it. Lady Christina de Souza was a great character, and everyone on the *Doctor Who* team made me feel very welcome. David Tennant in particular is really lovely. It was very exciting and we filmed part of it in Dubai, working with a big red bus in the sand dunes was a fairly surreal experience, to say the least.

Are you a football fan?

My ex-boyfriend played for non-league side Wealdstone FC, so he used to make me watch *Match of the Day* every week, and also *Soccer AM*, which I found funny. To be honest, I wasn't that into it, but I thought Jose Mourinho was very cute. I sound like such a girl for saying that!

You're not the first to have the Mourinho thing. Who are your icons?

In terms of acting, I'd say Ava Gardner. She was a very strong woman who seemed very comfortable with herself, and I love her in *The Killers* and *The Barefoot Contessa*.

Finally, if you weren't an actress, what would you like to be?

I think it would be really cool to be a wildlife photographer. Or perhaps something that involves the ocean, like a marine biologist. Or maybe a surf instructor, something like that.

Michelle is a patron of CLIC Sargent, the leading cancer charity in the UK for children and young people. The charity also supports 18-24 year-old cancer sufferers, an age bracket that tends to fall between the children's ward and the adult's ward in hospitals.