

Michelle's licence to THRILL

From *Bionic Woman* to a fearless hitwoman in her latest film, former *EastEnders* star Michelle Ryan has found success – on both sides of the Atlantic – with her don't-mess-with-me roles. Here she talks to *Maureen Paton* about her incredible – and sometimes difficult – journey from troubled Walford teen to all-action heroine

Photographs TITO ORTIZ

It's hard to believe that the demure-looking actress I meet for tea is the same girl who has led several screen lives of such melodramatic mayhem over the past decade. Back in 2000, Michelle Ryan achieved instant fame at 16 as bolshie young *EastEnders* Zoe Slater who, during five action-packed years in the BBC soap, became embroiled in a rape/abortion/murder love triangle with her boyfriend Dennis Rickman and his father Dirty Den, while also discovering that her sister Kat was really her mother. Michelle went on to make her name on the other side of the Atlantic in the role of NBC's *Bionic Woman*, performing all her own stunts as super-powered agent Jaime Sommers in a show that won her such A-list admirers as Goldie Hawn, who told her: 'You have a great aura, you're going to be great.'

Now cinema audiences are about to see her give an astonishingly mature performance as mysterious hitwoman Kelly in the new movie *4.3.2.1*, the latest urban youth thriller by *Kidulthood/Adulthood* writer-director-actor Noel Clarke, which stars Tamsin Egerton and Emma Roberts (Julia's niece) as friends who get caught up in a diamond heist. Michelle has only recently turned 26, but she seems more like 36 in the role

of femme fatale Kelly, in which her jet-black humour steals the show in just a few scenes. 'I can play older than myself because I have a young face but a curvy body – it's the tits, I can't get away from them so I celebrate them,' she giggles as she hands me a cup of tea in her London publicist's office.

And yes, she does all her own stunts again. Kelly induces such delicious dread with her every appearance in *4.3.2.1* (I was half expecting to get expertly hurled across the room by way of greeting) that I can't help thinking Michelle would be a shoo-in for the next Bond villainess. In fact she auditioned for *Casino Royale*'s dark heroine Vesper Lynd, the double-agent role that eventually went to Eva Green. 'In many ways the villainesses are the most interesting Bond women to play because they're not looking to be rescued – there's a lot to be said for having that independence,' she enthuses. 'I love the fact that *4.3.2.1* is a female-led action thriller, and that Kelly is as tough as the guys in the story, with no flirting to get what she needs. She's totally fierce.'

And what about yourself, Michelle? The half-Irish Ms Ryan gives another giggle. 'I can be easy-going and a real softie, but there's a point beyond which I won't be pushed – and that's the Irishwoman's way,' she says, showing the same determination that was in evidence last month when she ran the London

Marathon for the first time to raise funds for her favourite children's cancer charity Clic Sargent, for which she has been a patron for seven years ('I'm going to do the New York City Marathon next').

'I've always had lots of energy – and I need to get rid of it,' says Michelle, who ascribes her casting as *Bionic Woman* to what she calls her big-boned, American-style looks ('It's all about the aesthetics over there and how they can package that,' she explains sagely). Although *Bionic Woman* wasn't recommissioned because of the Hollywood screenwriters' strike, the nine episodes she made in 2007 won her an adoring fanbase.

As a 15-year-old with a Saturday job at London's Pineapple Dance Studios, this fireman's daughter from Enfield in North London would join in the dance classes led by West End professionals after first catching the show-business bug when she saw *Grease* aged ten. 'I then watched all the old classic movies with my granny, such as *Gone With the Wind* and *From Here To Eternity*, and did jazz, ballet and tap dancing with a local drama group. I love getting lost in movies – it's all gone from there, I guess,' says Michelle, who practised a cockney accent in order to audition for *EastEnders* just after her GCSEs.

Her career since then has thrived without any full-time drama-school training. Her looks help. ►



Clockwise from far left: Michelle in *EastEnders* with co-star Jessie Wallace (Kat), 2005; starring in a *Doctor Who* special alongside David Tennant in 2009; playing tough on the big screen in *4.3.2.1*; battling it out in the action-packed US drama *Bionic Woman* in 2007

roots are clearly important to Michelle: her current boyfriend is someone she's known since her teenage years. "For his sake, I'm not going to say too much or give his name. He's not in the business, he does something totally normal and it makes a real difference to have known him from way back – he's very smart with a great way of seeing things, and I love his objectivity," she says.

Growing up in public as an *EastEnders* starlet meant her private life was constantly being raked over by gossip-hounds: the show was watched by up to 20 million viewers during her time there. The merging of her identity with Zoe's in many people's minds 'really used to annoy me,' says Michelle, whose own love life was pretty mild by comparison. The reported romance with ex-*Footballers' Wives* star Gary Lucy amounted to 'only three dates when I was 18 – and then I stopped calling him. It's like you sneeze and there's a story.' As for her one-time engagement to footballer Tommy Williams, she was 19 when they met and 23 when they split in 2007. 'Both of us saw it wasn't working any more, although we're still friends,' says Michelle, who won the lead role in *Bionic Woman* two weeks later.

She still likes to keep up with *EastEnders* friends such as Kacey Ainsworth, who played Zoe's aunt Little Mo Mitchell and with whom she recently went to see their former co-star Tamzin Outhwaite in the West End revival of *Sweet Charity*. 'I always looked up to Tamzin because she had done musical theatre,' she says, 'and girlfriends are very important to me – the advice you get from them is priceless.'

Recently a paper ran a story that Michelle would return this December to *EastEnders*, that force-field which sucks so many actors back, but she insists it's not true. '*EastEnders* was my apprenticeship, a huge part of my life that toughened me up for the industry and prepared me for *Bionic Woman*, because both are juggernauts in their own way. But I've had five years of freedom since I left and it's lovely. There's a whole world out there – you move forward and all the different experiences open you up.' And having tasted freedom, she doesn't even want to sign up to the golden handcuffs of a long-running American show. 'At 26, I don't want a seven-year contract after spending my teens in a five-year one for *EastEnders*.'

For, just like any self-respecting hitwoman, Michelle likes to 'fly under the radar – going in, doing a job and then disappearing for a while. It gets harder and harder to do that the further up the ladder you go, because obviously you get more exposed. But I love being a chameleon. And I'm totally leaving it up to what's meant to be. If you lead with your heart and keep moving forward, things happen.'

And what's meant to be, I suspect, is that Goldie Hawn will be proved absolutely right: there's a great future ahead, whatever way she wants to play it, for Michelle Ryan. **■**

4.3.2.1 will be in cinemas on Wednesday

◀ of course: they got her voted number four in *FHM* magazine's poll of the 100 sexiest women back in 2005 after her *EastEnders* stint. 'It's flattering, but a lot of those things are dependent on profile and how many times you have taken your clothes off – which I've only done once, for *Arena* magazine,' Michelle reassures me, referring to a cleverly angled photo shoot in which she wore nothing but a pair of jeans for the cult photographer Rankin. As she puts it, 'There are ways to do sexy, and you didn't see anything because my back was facing the camera.'

Which brings us to the role that looks likely to be her most controversial yet: Loretta – the stoned stripper and pole-dancer she plays in *A Girl Walks Into a Bar*, the upcoming film by *Snakes On a Plane* writer-turned-director Sebastian Gutierrez, out in July. Although at first glance Kelly and Loretta seem, well, poles apart, Michelle argues that both characters are 'numbed-out victims. Life has been pretty brutal to Kelly, but she has survived it by being so tough. And Loretta smokes a lot of pot to deal with her job as a stripper, which she doesn't like; although the dancing, for her, is a release, the reality of being in a bar with guys coming up and hitting on her is grim.'

The movie weaves in and out of the showgirls' lives with what Michelle describes as 'lots of interconnecting stories. Sebastian has a real respect for women and wants the film to celebrate them, so he wanted us all to look beautiful.' The role was her first LA project since *Bionic Woman*; and far from feeling disempowered by playing such a contrast to Jaime Sommers, she maintains that 'there was something empowering about the pole-dancing – it was so liberating'. But she does admit that it was a relief to be able to keep her clothes on. 'I'm a stripper who isn't actually seen stripping – you just see me dancing in costume and then backstage.' And her mother must have been equally relieved. 'When I told her I'd been offered a job playing a stripper, she

said, "That's not like you!" I think she was shocked, but I was like, "Mum, come on! I'm an actress."

Michelle still lives at home with her mother Tina, a Clinique make-up artist ('from a young age I've known about the best products'), her father Craig, a former fireman who now works in fire safety, and brother Mark, 23, an electrician. They're a close family, and that support must have been vital after lurid and untrue allegations about Michelle having a nervous breakdown halfway through her time on *EastEnders*. Nowadays she makes light of what must have been a huge media ordeal: 'I did have a wobble at the age of 18 when I felt I didn't know who I was and when everything seemed overwhelming, but every young woman goes through such things,' she explains. 'At that teen stage, you don't have your voice yet – you don't know how to stand your ground. I was overly conscious of appearance and weight then, but I don't know many of my girlfriends who haven't been. It made me go a bit inward: I ate less and I was a bit run-down. But it was absolutely categorically never as extreme as anorexia, it was just a case of not taking care of myself.'

'I was living at home, though, so I had that security to go back to every night. I didn't need to take medication or anything. I just needed to take some time off from the show. It wasn't my parents or the producers who said I needed to take some time off – I asked for it. So they wrote me out of the show for a few months and I just rested.'

Somehow Michelle makes living with her parents sound like the coolest thing, though she laughingly admits that, at 26, it could be time to fly the nest and get her own place. 'But because I've done so many different acting projects and often don't know where I'll be travelling from one month to the next, there has been something great about having family to go home to, about having that normality in my life. It's a big house and we all have our own space.' Solid