

At least part of this industry buzz (*Snow International* recently put her on the cover of its prestigious annual "Stars of Tomorrow" issue) is due to Ryan's careful management of her own image. Where the youthful stars of most other soaps are rarely out of the gossip pages, getting tanked up at parties (*Coronation Street*'s cast, in particular, seem unwilling to turn down any event that promises free booze), Ryan is rarely seen at these functions. "I think it just comes down to what you're comfortable with," she tells *Arena*. "I just find that whole thing so insincere. When I first went down a red carpet, I was so nervous and I thought it'd get easier after I'd done a few. But it's just really not my thing at all, going to awards and premieres."

Other than a brief period when she was linked to (and slumped) *Footballer's Wives* goth Gary

Lucy, she has escaped relatively unscathed from the intrusions of the tabloids. "These'll be the odd shot of me walking my dog or something. But as long as it's not really on a regular basis you just think 'Whatever'. The best advice I was given was just to concentrate on what you do onscreen. You hope to have longevity in your career and if you sell out at an early age you're basically stuck like that."

Conversely, she is bluntly dismissive of celebs who constantly complain about press intrusion while simultaneously feeding the paparazzi crocodile. "I'm sorry, but you really can avoid it if you don't want to be photographed. I go to Nobu with my boyfriend and there's no press around – but if you set it up then you will get papped. I could probably quadruple my wages if I sold out, but then you're crossing that line. Basically, if you walk around like a normal

person, you get treated like a normal person."

This kind of no-nonsense maturity makes it easy to forget just how young Ryan is – she still lives with her parents in Enfield (although is about to buy her own flat) and briefly gushes about her ongoing relationship with her "first serious boyfriend". "I was saying to my friend, 'I never meet anyone and they're all arseholes anyway.' And she said she knew this guy who liked me, but he didn't watch the show. We met and clicked and it was really effortless. He wasn't insecure or in awe of me or anything."

While most of her time is eaten up by the show's 12-hours-a-day, six-days-a-week schedule, she displays a pleasingly esoteric familiarity with London's theatres, citing David Marnet's *Sexual Perversity In Chicago* and Greek guestfest *Machos* as recent highlights. (Unfortunately, this is also the point in the conversation where *Arena*'s *Pygmalion*-esque dreams of taking her away from the squalor of Walford and turning her into a "lady" begin to fade.)

While this is all perfectly sensible, one suspects that the experience of being thrust into the public eye so young is what put Ryan off the more public side of being a celebrity. "If you go into a soap you suddenly become a known face overnight. Everyone is aware of you and people assume that you earn loads of money and everything's so great." With little professional acting experience beyond "a gala performance at the Palladium with Wayne Sleep", the 16-year-old was suddenly at the centre of the BBC's most high profile show. "My parents weren't in the business so they had no idea of what it would entail," she recalls. "And you're still growing up, you're still finding things out about yourself. You're not really an adult – you're still a child – but you've been put in this adult environment and it's a real shock. I had a very idyllic view of life when I came into it, and you soon realise that you have to stand up for yourself. You want to be everyone's friend, and you want everyone to get on, but things just don't work like that sometimes."

It seems like much of this was grounded in the level of physical scrutiny that any famous woman finds herself subjected to. "Before I joined, I was never really aware of how I looked; and suddenly you're on the front of magazines and you've got people commenting about your weight and the way you look. You can become very self-conscious. Being on TV makes you look bigger – it just highlights everything" ▶

"You hope to have longevity in your career and if you sell out at an early age you're basically stuck like that"



Black dress by Roland Mouret at Matches; black heels by Gina; stockings by Aristoc at Paridiso

There is an impending sense that she is the one “most likely” to get away from *EastEnders* and on to bigger things

really, I was very uncomfortable with the whole culture around it, but I'm happy with the way I look now."

This is perfectly evinced by her cover shoot for *Arise*, an exclusive for men's mags. Confirming that less scrupulous "barely legal" publications have "been asking since I was 16... and offering a lot of money," she held firm until *Arise's* approach. "It seemed right to do it," she says. "And Rankin [the photographer] is a bit of a legend." There is an impending sense that she is the one "most likely" to get away from *EastEnders* and on to bigger things, due to her career-minded focus, acting skills and looks—which, one suspects, have the soap's costume department working overtime to drag her down to the dowdy level of her co-stars. "I've got no qualms now about looking rough on screen and being shot with no make-up," she laughs.

She's equally realistic about the kind of film roles that are likely to be offered to her at first. "If you look at someone like Cameron Diaz, she's the ultimate blonde bombshell and made her name playing that character in *The Mask*. And then she went on to do stuff like *Being John Malkovich*. Or how Charlize Theron suddenly did a film like *Monster*. Obviously you have to play to your strengths—but ultimately you have to do other things."

So, while *Arise's* dreams of rescuing Zoe from Walford and showing her a better life have turned out to be complete balls, at least she has a great life ahead of her. One that doesn't involve us showing her how to use wine lists and cutlery admirably, but a great life nonetheless. And we're happy for her. Honestly. □



Jeans by Alexander McQueen at Harvey Nichols; black shoes by Gina