

Photographs by Marco Marezza - Styled by Nicky Yates

# Soap dish

How many *EastEnders* actresses have been shot by Rankin and starred in the most talked-about play of the year? Michelle Ryan is more than just a bit of froth, says **Annabel Rivkin**

**M**ichelle Ryan is far prettier, quieter and less broad-shouldered than her character from *EastEnders*. Zoe Slater, would have had us believe, Michelle, who left the soap last June, walks into Claridge's

lobby looking freshly scrubbed and discreet in a Breton striped top, skinny jeans and a pair of red ballet shoes. She extends a foot for my approval. 'LK Bennett... Do you like them? I had a shopping spree in Richmond.'

Certainly, in terms of sheer classical good looks, she is the classiest thing to have come out of *EastEnders* in the history of the programme. She may not have Tamzin Outhwaite's ballsiness or Martine McCutcheon's brassy appeal, but she looks like an escapee from a Fifties technicolour movie - peachy perfection and thick-lashed, busy coyness.

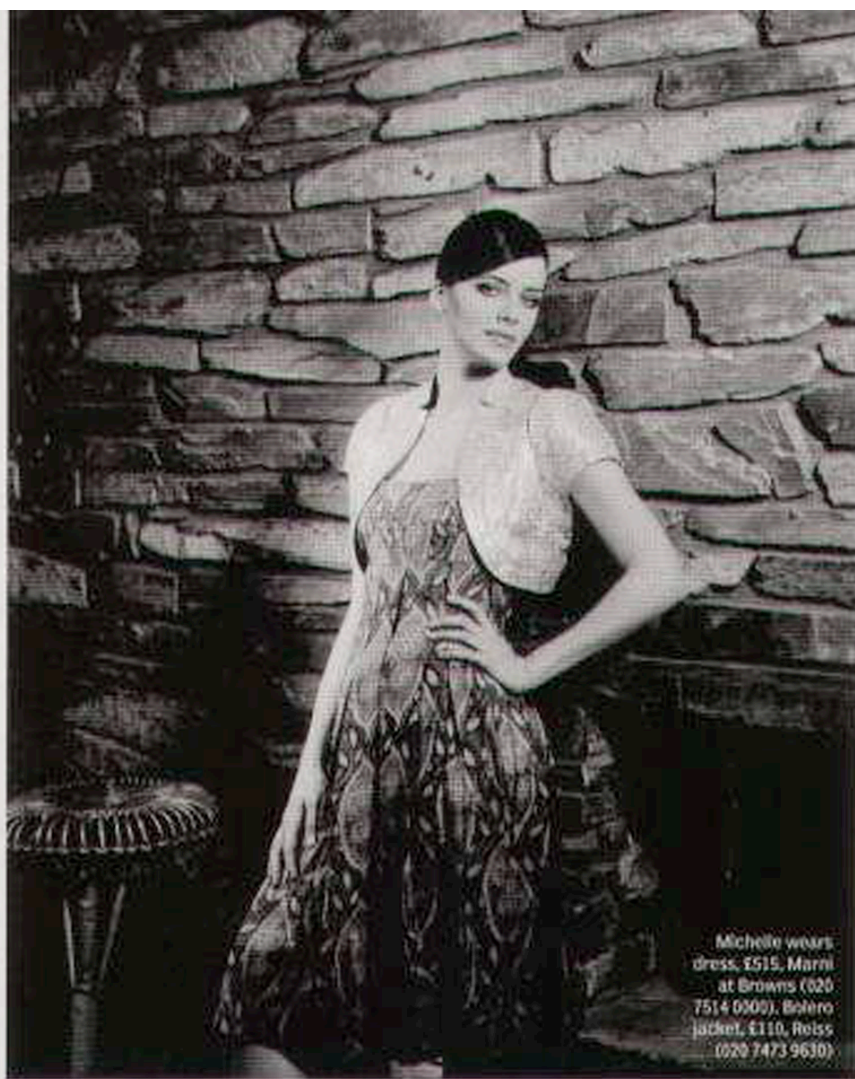
The shyness is real. 'I was so geeky at school,' she says in clear received pronunciation, 'always in the front row and just eager to learn. Actually there was a bit of bullying until people just

accepted that I was the drama kid. They could understand that.'

Michelle, 21, lives in Enfield with her parents, a Clinique beauty advisor and a fireman, and her 18-year-old brother Mark, who is an apprentice engineer, but her boyfriend Tommy Williams lives in Chiswick. 'So I spend a lot of time in the car. Luckily I like driving.' Tommy, 26, is a non-league football player with Boreham Wood. 'The difference between that and professional football is the money basically,' explains Michelle, who admits that the couple are engaged but 'we're thinking that marriage is years and years away; really it's more of a promise, a commitment thing'.

Leaving her local comprehensive - 'we couldn't afford a theatre school but now I'm glad about that' - Michelle joined *EastEnders* aged 16 as the youngest member of the caterwauling Slater family, and proceeded to cry and storm about for months on end. The Slater sisters were *EastEnders*' most iconic brood since the battling Watts family yelled their way into our consciousness in the soap's first episode. There was the 'my sister is actually my mother' storyline, not to mention the 'I helped kill Den' fiasco. Despite her watery misery, Michelle instantly accrued a male following. 'Most of the feedback I got was

Michelle wears top with belt, £450, Roland Mouret at Selfridges (08708 377 377). Skirt, £696, Lanvin at Matches (020 7221 0255). Gold and quartz ring, £1,495, Catherine Prevost (020 7584 8860)



Michelle wears  
dress, £515, Marni  
at Browns (020  
7514 0505), Bolero  
jacket, £110, Reiss  
(020 7473 9630)

## 'She managed to be both very funny and very sexy — a tricky conjuring act' *Toby Young*

nic!' she says. 'But there was the odd angry, abusive letter and the odd weird, sexual one.' She resisted most of the lad-mag offers, thinking that 'my body wasn't up to scratch for that sort of thing and I was never going to be comfortable sitting there in a bikini'. She did, however, agree to do just one saucy shoot because Rankin was dangled as the photographer and 'I had always wanted to be shot by him'.

Generally, Michelle was left in peace to potter around North London. She was never interested in falling bleary-eyed about the West End late at night, so the red tops left her alone. 'Soon after I started on *EastEnders* I began wearing a baseball cap and keeping my head down, mainly because everyone else did. I can see now that, on the whole, getting noticed is about wanting to get noticed.' Press interest escalated when she took four months off suffering from burn-out. 'I just slept and hung out at home and had a holiday,' she says. 'I had been working 12-hour days and six-day weeks for a couple of years, and even though the press were very good to me, I was growing and my body was changing and every time they commented that I looked tall or big on

screen, I took it terribly badly!' The newspapers pinned her 'tiredness' to an apparent heartbreak at the hands of *Footballers' Wives* actor Gary Lucy. 'Oh honestly,' says Michelle good-naturedly, 'we'd been on three dates. We were still talking about the weather and our favourite films. Really he had nothing to do with anything.'

In fact, Williams is her first boyfriend and she met him on a blind date. 'He picked me up to take me to my favourite restaurant [a local Italian] and I just opened the door and thought 'I like you.' When I was at school, if anyone had told me that I would be with someone as gorgeous as Tommy I would never have believed them. I wish I had a photograph to show you.' True, Tommy is perfectly agreeable-looking, but Michelle is a real cracker. 'It was effortless from the start,' she says of her romance, 'and I feel so lucky to be with someone who I still really fancy and who I laugh with and who I can behave like a five-year-old with.'

Having left the soap — although they didn't kill her off so the door remains open for a return — Michelle played a small part in *Cashback*, an independent British film co-starring Emilia Fox, before heading to the stage in Islington to play the part of magazine receptionist in *Who's the Daddy?*, a dramatic take on last year's *Spectator*

sex scandals. 'I didn't read any reviews,' she says. 'I was determined to just enjoy it.' The reviews, though, were good and Toby Young, the play's co-writer, is a fan. 'After I saw her audition, I lobbied hard for her to get the part,' he says. 'She managed to be both very funny and very sexy, which is quite a tricky conjuring act; most comedy actresses aren't terribly sexually alluring.'

Her next outing is as a doctor's daughter in *Agatha Christie's Marple*. 'It's shot in quite a Hitchcockian way,' she says, 'and I was excited to work with Geraldine McEwan [Miss Marple], who was wonderful. I saw some of it yesterday and I think I look enormous in woolly cardies and big skirts, but never mind.'

Michelle has been to LA a couple of times and dismisses it as 'not my kind of place... so industrial', but would venture stateside again should work carry her there. 'I just feel so lucky and so free and there are some brilliant things coming my way.'

I strongly suggest that Hollywood looks a little more closely at young Michelle Ryan, pours her into a corset, and watches box-office figures soar. This is a screen siren in the making; and a very charming one, too.

*Agatha Christie's Marple: By the Pricking of My Thumbs* is on ITV1 on Sunday 19 February at 9pm