

# Michelle Ryan

## Q&A

The Bionic Woman star on her new stage role, the perils of pole dancing and the film that got away

**You're appearing in a new stage version of *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Have you read Patricia Highsmith's book?**  
I read it three weeks into rehearsals. It's so wonderfully sinister, the human condition explored with all this darkness under the surface. The stage version is quite different - my character, Marge, is sort of empowered by the disappointment of her boyfriend at the hands of Tom Ripley. It helps her become the young woman she's meant to be. She's writing before long. And playing tennis.

**You planned to be a theatre actor before getting the part of Zoe Slater in *EastEnders*, didn't you?**

The teacher at my local drama group told me: "I know you want to do theatre and dance, but if you were to get a job, say in *EastEnders*, you couldn't turn it down." It was hypothetical, but then a few years later I did get offered a job in *EastEnders*.

**Did she make other predictions?**

No, but it has often happened like that for me - somebody says a random comment that ends up happening. When I left *EastEnders*, somebody asked me if I'd consider trying American TV. Then I got the call about *Bionic Woman*. The next minute I'm being asked to fly out to the US.

**Did you say immediately say yes to *Bionic Woman* [as lead character Jaime Sommers, in NBC's 2007 reinvention of the cult show]?**

No, I wasn't sure about doing it. They wanted me to sign a contract committing to the show before I'd even got on a plane! It wasn't like someone was spinning me a line - this was a big network, but I thought: 'Hang on a sec, I've done one audition, I don't know what you guys are like.' I told them I wouldn't sign.

**You played hardball with US TV execs?**

Once I'd met everyone, I was excited to be involved, but I wasn't willing to sign my life away just like that. I'm passionate and want to be a part of things, but there's a difference between being enthusiastic and desperate.

**Were you pleased to get the part?**

I saw it as an adventure. I've always been pretty fearless. But I remember, when I first got the part, that all I had in my head was the seven-year thing.

**The seven-year thing?**

They sign you up to be on the show for seven years. A long time, even though it might not end up running that long. I reasoned to myself that I was only 22, and I'd spent five years on a UK soap, so I knew what it would mean. I knew what I'd be sacrificing and giving up.

**A successful US TV show can often feed into Hollywood success. Did you ever let your imagination run ahead?**

It's not like I had a game plan, but that's the expected route: you work on a TV show and in the hiatus between seasons you work on a movie. That was definitely what the intention was. But then the writers' strike hit and everything stopped.

**'I want to be a part of things, but there's a difference between being enthusiastic and desperate'**

**Did you have a 'hustler' movie lined up?**

There were job offers that came in while I was there that, because of the writers' strike and my *Bionic Woman* contract, I wasn't able to take. It would be easy to say, "Oh, but I deserved it!" Well, no, because the reason I got offered the big part in the big movie was *Bionic Woman* in the first place. That's just how it goes.

**What was the movie?**

I will admit when it came out in cinemas I was... [makes crying noise]. It would have been perfect for me. So that one coming out...

**What was the film?**

I'm not going to say what it was, but it was huge. An action film. A friend of mine who's an actress, Kacey Ainsworth [Little Mo in *EastEnders*],

told me: "What's meant for you won't go by you." But missing that film hurt.

***Bionic Woman* was cancelled in its first series, partly due to the writers' strike. Do you look back on that with regret?**

For me, I got to go out and experience it all. If it had been a huge success, that would have been great, but it's gone. I'm working, it's worked out fine. There were other people who were much more affected than I was. Sometimes in life, random things can blind-side you.

**Do you ever think you might have had a lucky escape? Sci-fi fans ask a lot of the stars of their favourite shows.**

I like all that, the interaction, going to comic conventions, seeing the enthusiasm. When I ran the marathon this year, all different things were being shouted at me. "Go Michelle!" "Go Zoe!" "Go Bionic Woman!" Even "Go Wonder Woman!"

**Are you based in the UK full-time now?**

I'm at home with my family in London. Going to fly the next soon, I promise. But it's quite a big house, and we can all have our own lives. We can have a big family meal on a Sunday, but my boyfriend and I can also cook for ourselves if we want to. He was helping with my lines for an audition while we cooked at the weekend.

**Do you still watch *EastEnders*?**

No, I didn't really watch it when I was in it towards the end. I don't think there's anything wrong with that - it's work.

**You've described yourself as commitment-phobic about work. Why?**

My dad's a fireman, and I often ask him how he's stayed doing it for 20 years. He says because he never knows what will happen when he goes into work. That's why I wanted to be an actor - to constantly do things that were diverse and different.

**What's coming up next for you?**

A stoner-stripper role.

**Excuse me?**

It's an American film called *Girl Walks Into a Bar*. I play a pole dancer who's depressed and gets stoned after work. I had to take pole-dancing classes for it. I had no idea how much strength that requires. It made my martial arts training for *Bionic Woman* seem easy. *Interview by Sam Lamont*

*The Talented Mr Ripley will be at Royal & Derngate, Northampton from 27 September to 9 October*



Michelle Ryan: 'I've always been pretty fearless.' Photograph by Sarah Lee