

# They have rebuilt her

It's a quantum leap from Walford to Hollywood, but the former *EastEnders* Michele Ryan has successfully rinsed the soap off her hands and remodelled herself as the Bionic Woman. The actress who was bullied at school won't be messed with again.  
Interview by Craig McLean. Photograph by Lorenzo Agius

Over a hefty lunchtime plate of steak and chips in an Idington pub, Michelle Ryan is still struggling to come to terms with everything that happened to her last year. 'I'm piecing it all back together,' the 23-year-old actress says, her smile as wide as her eyes are doe-like. 'It was a complete blur. It all moved so fast.' Bionically fast, you might say.

Early in 2007 Ryan was just another alumna of the British soap factory. She had played the putter-jacketed market-stallholder Zoe Slater in *EastEnders* for five years. Her character had begun her stint on Albert Square as a slouchy teen with a false moan - 'Eessssss, Kat!' she would yell at the woman she thought was her sister but was really her mum. By the end, Zoe had survived incest abuse revelations and matured into a graceful young woman with a sheepy bleat ('Ohhh, Dennis') who found herself tangled in a rape/abortion/killer love triangle with her boyfriend Dennis Watts and his dad 'Dirty' Don Watts.

In May 2005, having effectively lived as Zoe since taking her GCSEs, Ryan left *EastEnders*. She did a bit of theatre, a bit-part in a costume drama (*Manfield Park*), a drama series (last summer's James Nesbitt vehicle *Asyl*). So far, so post-soap. Then, 14 months ago, while she was filming a horror film, *Flick*, in Wales with Faye Dunaway, Ryan was asked to do a videotaped audition for a big

new series. *The Bionic Woman*, a remake of the 1970s show that starred Lindsay Wagner, was being developed by the American network NBC. The swimmer's shoulders that had given Zoe a look of hunched disaffection and Cockney argy-bargy in London E20 were viewed in Los Angeles as suggestive of a tough feminine physique that - with the aid of future-clever cyber-surgery - could convincingly kick terrorist and criminal butt.

'I think [the executive producer] David Eich felt I was very natural,' she reflects. They also appreciated her ease with an American accent. 'And the experience I had being on *EastEnders* - I think they just felt, "She's unknown in the US but she'll be able to handle it."'

Ryan landed the part, apparently triumphing over, among other contenders, Jennifer Aniston. She would be Jaime Sommers, the San Francisco bartender who, after a car crash, has her shattered body rebuilt: superfast legs, one strong arm, an extra-sensitive ear and a brilliantly far-sighted eye. Ryan left her parents' home in Enfield, north London (where she had remained throughout her time on *EastEnders*), and spent the spring, summer and autumn making *The Bionic Woman* in Vancouver.

It seems Eich was impressed by Ryan's can-doing-so approach - qualities that matter a great deal in the intense, big-stakes atmosphere of American television. 'When Michelle came to this role she

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Duh: stronger, faster Michelle Ryan as Jamie Sommers in scenes from *The Blind Woman*



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had a lot of things she wanted to perfect,' he has said. 'She looked at it not just as a great opportunity career-wise but an opportunity to embrace who she was so she could fit into this role as perfectly as possible.'

When it premiered in the US on a Wednesday evening in September, *The Blind Woman* was watched by a staggering 14 million. It was NBC's best ratings performance in that highly competitive slot since the premiere of *The West Wing* eight years before. Critics raved about the exciting young acting talent in the title role. Here was another high-octane, high-budget, high-quality American drama, with the special-effects whiz of *Heros*, the dark background narrative of *Lost*, the thrilling momentum of *24*. All fronted by a beautiful 'glamazon' heroine.

It's a long jump from Walford to Hollywood, and Michelle Ryan had seemingly cleared it with ease. But it took a lot of hard work. For all her jolly-gishness, Ryan is a fiercely driven young woman who is not afraid of hard graft.

'Michelle's an ambitious girl, but not in a desperate way,' James Nesbitt says. 'She thinks that this isn't just her job, it's her vocation, and she will do as much as she can. She's very experienced and very technical, but equally she doesn't take it too seriously - we had a very good laugh making *Joly!*'

'Tight sets, great script, and me leading it all,' is how Ryan laughingly recalls the filming of *The Blind Woman*. She credits a childhood spent in drama groups as giving her a grounding in accents. But just to be sure, the studio hired her a dialect coach and an acting coach. Each, who also oversaw the highly successful reboot of the 1990s sci-fi series *Battlestar Galactica*, told Ryan that he wanted her to be 'as supported as you possibly can be.'

This also meant a rigorous regime of stunt and fitness training. It was 'really grueling. I am a real tomboy and I've always been quite athletic, but I guess it was that British sensibility - 'oh, I'll do a little bit' - and I like to indulge,' she says with a guilty grin. 'But I love doing Bikram yoga, and I really got into doing that more.' On top of that, she had to commit to 90 minutes with a personal trainer every day, and studied the Israeli martial art Krav Maga for two hours three times a week. This was alongside the arduous daily filming routine. And evening stints with her dialect coach. 'By that time I'd be slightly delirious and some of my accents would be a bit wonky,' she laughs.

Ryan asked that she be allowed to do her own stunts; the producers were happy with this 'because

it meant we got some great shots'. At one point she had to leap an 18ft drop; a worried camera operator asked if she was scared. 'I was, like, "I am loving it!" I used to run at school, and I did endless running [scenes]. Then all the fight sequences - it was so funny, they had this scene in a nail salon. They said, "We need you to kick this guy." I said, "Look, I have really strong legs, if I kick him he's going to go through the set." They were, like, "No, it'll be fine." And I did kick him and he nearly went through the wall. Then I punched him and sort of caught him - I guess I'm very strong,' she laughs.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ryan did injure herself 'quite a bit'. In one episode, while strapped in a fancy version of a baby's bouncer harness (the kind that hang from door-frames), she had to leap up and, with a flying kick, knock an actor through a glass wall.

'It was so rushed and everything was moving so fast we didn't have a chance to rehearse it, and I was, like, "Just put me in, we'll do it." They said, "OK, we have to break for lunch in half an hour, we're going to get it in half an hour." And I had my arms tied behind my back up on this harness and I just fell. I had this huge bruise and lump and quite a few bruises on my leg. By the end of it I thought, I don't need to do as much as I have been. I can let the stunt double do more. I have to live a whole series. So I learnt that I don't need to give all of myself for the role. Which is something I'd always done.'

It was *Grease* that did it: aged 10, Ryan went to see a production of the original high-school musical in London's West End. It just looked so much fun,' she remembers. 'I thought, that's what I want to do.' Her parents weren't in the 'industry' - her father was a farmer (he is now a fire safety officer), her mother a beautician for Clinique (Ryan also has a younger brother in the final year of his electrician's apprenticeship) - but they were happy to encourage their daughter's ambition.

She attended a local drama group, throwing herself into singing, dancing and acting and, eventually, teaching classes. It was, she admits, her 'ouder' - she was being bullied at school. I ask if this well-spoken, keen and super-nice girl was picked on for being a geek.

'Yeah, and because I pronounced my T's. And because I always had my hand up, and respected the teachers.'

You were a girly swot?

'Yes! And very athletic, and into all the music

stuff. I chose the school I went to because it had a really great drama department. So I guess I always knew from that point forwards that that was what I wanted to do.'

The bullying, though, made her 'Miss Buzzwort'. At one point the abuse went from the verbal to the physical. Sly Chinese burns in class?

'None...,' she says slowly. 'It was worse than that. Um, it was pretty like... It was sort of... I was kind of attacked.'

Buam up?

'Yeah. At school, on the [playing] field. Yeah,' she says quietly. 'It wasn't great. I had a really close friend, her older sister stepped in and stopped it. They said I'd used something I hadn't... I remember sitting in the [school] office with the year head and he was saying, "We know what happened." I was, like, "Nothing happened." I think I was just such a geek - people sense fine. That was me, I was a bit of a sofa.'

Things improved once she was in the upper school. 'The boys grew up so that helped. And I really got into my drama. I think that's what drove me to sort of... A tall, angular woman, Ryan shifts in the pub's spazzy chair. 'I'd sit in class and cry to myself. "I'm going to be a successful actress..."

While still at school she landed a small part in a children's television programme called *The Heart Watch*, which was fairly cool as far as her classmates were concerned. She and her theatre group also performed at the London Palladium with Wayne Sleep, which I suspect was less cool.

'It was cool for me,' she beams. 'I loved my theatre group. I was on the stage of the London Palladium, dancing - that was great. A lot of the discipline I have comes from that drama group from my teacher there - she used to be a dancer. She was so professional, and focused and determined. I learnt a lot from her. And all the dance training has come in handy with *Bionic*.'

For all that, no one at school could believe pretty Michelle was going to be in *Zoolander*, not least because she had said no one that she had auditioned. They were, like, 'What?' Ryan laughingly recalls, spluttering on her chips. 'You're doing *Zoolander*? That's not you!'

John Yorke, then the executive producer on *Zoolander*, now the controller of BBC drama productions, remembers the first time he saw Ryan. The makers of the soap had been holding workshops to cast a new family, the Stairs. They had found all the actors, saw someone to play the youngest daughter, Zoe. 'The casting director told



From right Ryan as Zoe Slater with Joanne Wallace as her mother Kat in *EastEnders*, 2001, as Maria Birtwhistle in a television adaptation of *Mansfield Park* with Rory Kinnear as Rushworth, 2007, in the 2007 horror film *Flick*



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me to watch this [audition] tape,' Yorke recalls. 'And in the first five seconds, Michelle looked up at the camera with those extraordinary eyes. I stopped the tape and said, "We've got to cast her." She captured your heart instantly. It was really simple.'

Yorke and his team knew the first two years of Slater storylines, that Zoe would discover the truth of her parentage. 'We knew that would profoundly change Zoe. What we didn't know was that Michelle, who was very raw, with no technique when she started, would become such a fine actress. She managed to do that thing you want from an actor: they're not just reading the lines, they're getting under the character.'

I ask Ryan if there was ever a storyline that,

even for the trouble-magnet teen, the actress felt went too far?

'Actually, yes,' she says. 'They wanted the love scene between Zoe and Den to be even more dramatic and sort of intimate. I stood up and said, "I'm not doing that - this is exploiting the character and the situation." But pretty much everything else I just did. Because you didn't really get a choice. That's the job you have to do.'

And it was a job she was very good at. Tracy-Ann Oberman, who played Den's wife Chrissie Watts, joined *EastEnders* from a largely theatrical background. She recalls her first day on the Square, in the nightclub known then as Angie's Den. 'And there was this very classy, beautiful,

warm and friendly girl who came up to me and gave me a big hug and said, "Welcome, hope you like it." I remember thinking, well, she must be a good actress because her character is so difficult.'

Chrissie would try to frame Zoe for Den's murder, and the two actresses filmed many a difficult scene. 'Sometimes it's a bit like a tennis match - easy game, or you wonder if you'll get some back,' Oberman says. 'Michelle always surprised me. She more than punched above her weight for her experience and age.'

Ryan found *EastEnders* an enjoyable but a tiring experience. Straight from school she was doing long hours, filming emotional, often storylines, gripping the nation's living rooms



less, she was 'linked' with Gary Lucy, an actor on *Footballers' Wives*; in fact they went on three dates. She was 'engaged' to Tommy Williams, an amateur footballer; in fact they weren't, and Ryan had to explain to upset relatives why they hadn't been invited to a fictitious wedding. In summer 2002 Ryan took time off from the soap: she was exhausted and her grandfather had died, and she had barely had any time to grieve. This was reported as some sort of breakdown and there was a reported 'sighting' of Ryan at a notorious north London suicide bridge.

'There has to be some huge drama,' she sighs. 'Being that famous that young, it changes so much. But then things are really great. I talk to friends who've been to college and they haven't had the best of times. And I've got a friend who's my age who's got two children and she's had her own troubles. Then you go, "Well, so - one has it easy." Life isn't easy.'

As much as the case with *The Blame Game*, where every silver lining has a cloud: after its first-week audience high, the figures slumped - by its eighth episode, only six million were watching. The show has endured the departure of key executives and, from the original pilot script that Ryan read, significant plot changes.

'Having worked on *EastEnders* for five years, I was very good at being able to just focus on what I needed to be doing on set,' she says. 'And then there were all these changes, and everyone was, like, "Wow, you handle it well." Being in that kind of environment at such a young age, you do learn.'

Late last year rumours abounded that *The Blame Game* was about to be cancelled. Then the Hollywood writers' strike hit, forcing the entire

production to shut down. Ryan was glad of the opportunity to come back to London, before Christmas - she missed her family and Marks & Spencer's fruit salad. But beneath her thoroughly nice, somewhat fully extroverted is steady ambition. She is itching to get back on the show, and would happily live in Los Angeles - she says she never bought a place in London because she didn't want to be tied to anything in Britain. Intent on being taken seriously as an actress, she studiously attended casting in on Zoe's bad-mag appeal with calendars and fitness videos. Emotionally, too, she is happily free and single: she split up with Williams before the *Blame Game* audition, and, contrary to gossip columns, isn't dating the actor Owen Wilson - she has never even met him. Having been through the celebrity mill already, she seems well able to handle the siller extremes of Hollywood success.

But for now she is in limbo. *The Blame Game* hasn't been cancelled, she insists, but until the writers' strike is resolved she doesn't think any decisions will be made. The break, though, has been useful. It has given everyone involved with the show 'a chance to breathe and reflect on everything that's happened. There is so much potential with the show, and I think we were finally finding our footing. I know NBC are behind it.'

And personally Michelle Ryan has had time, finally, to process the mad whirl of 2007. She will go back to *The Blame Game* happier, more content: 'I feel like a different person, in a way. I felt for so long I had something to prove. Now I feel like I don't any more. And no one really cares anyway but me,' she says brightly. 'If we go back I will just have a blast.'

*The Blame Game* is on ITV2 from March 11

the newspapers - week in, week out. 'Your brain doesn't know what's real,' she says. 'I was experiencing things as Zoe - like, Zoe was losing her virginity and doing things that I hadn't even done. Apart from being bullied I'd had a really nice life, a little fairy tale. Then you go into that environment - I was taking it all so seriously. You just needed to learn to shake it off. And because I'd dedicated myself for so long to be successful, from the age of 16 when I joined a drama group, it was important to remember to have a life as well.'

But this was tricky. The media interest in the young cast of *EastEnders* was (and remains) intense. Ryan was one of the best-behaved. Yorke says, avoiding nightclubs and parties. None the