

Up- market

Michelle Ryan, better known as *EastEnders*' Zoe Slater, abandons her market stall and heads "up west" for a world exclusive shoot with *Arena*. Over the next 12 pages, we bring you the pictures *Dirty Den* (as well as every other men's magazine) would love to get his hands on

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Over the years, *EastEnders* has given us compulsively watchable characters in the fine British tradition of the kitchen sink drama. Nick "Allo Ma!" Cotton, the henan-addled racist greaser who tried to kill his mother; James Willmott-Brown, the proto-Hoxtonite property developer (and, regrettably, date rapist); and that priest who ended up cracking and giving Gillian Taylor a one (understandably, in *Arena*'s eyes).

However, in recent years, the show has failed to deliver as many memorable figures – take, for example, the Ferreira family who arrived in Albert Square, became embroiled in numerous convoluted storylines with near-zero public interest and have now been chopped – which perhaps goes some way to explaining *EastEnders*' headline-grabbing ratings fall. Indeed, the dramatic highpoint of the last two years has been Gary The Idiot dressing like a giant banana on Halloween.

Thank goodness, then, for the Slater family (a Cockney collection of slags, battered wives, subnormal cab-drivers and petty criminals) and – more specifically – its youngest daughter, Zoe. Indeed, for some time now, *Arena*'s found itself strangely fascinated by her, in a way that we rarely are by dowdy working-class market traders. Increasingly, we've caught ourselves watching her on the show, feeling rather like ▶

one of those Victorian dandies who used to stroll the slums of London "helping" fallen women.

Played by 20-year-old Michelle Ryan, Zoe has been on a dramatic character-development arc over the last four years taking in incest, homelessness, sibling rivalry, broken hearts, older men, child abuse and one genuine lesbian kiss. "I know!" she laughs between takes at the BBC's Elstree Studios. "So much has happened to her. She's just up and down all the time and there's more drama to come.

Especially over Christmas. I can't tell you what happens, but it's Christmas Day and Leticia Dean [Ariana's childhood big-haired love interest, Sharon Watts] is leaving, so it's going to be the big one." She's too modest to suggest that this surfeit of plot lines is down to her being one of the only current cast members who can act her way out of a paper bag, but Ariana rather suspects that this is the case.

Until you're face-to-face with a soap actor, you

don't realise how deeply ingrained they are on the public consciousness. The sheer amount of time they spend on your screen (*EastEnders* is on four times a week, plus that weekend institution, the Sunday omnibus) creates a real sense of dislocation between the character and the person uncommon in most actors. "People assume you're like the character you play," says Ryan. "They can't get over the fact that I'm not Zoe. I don't sound like her and I'm not taller." ▶

Her character-development arc takes in incest, older men, child abuse and a genuine lesbian kiss



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

Indeed, the voice and her height are the two main surprises; where Zoe moans in aggressive cockney, Michelle speaks in perfectly enunciated, middle-class newswreader tones with the mannerisms of someone who's obviously been well brought up. While Zoe marches around with the aggressive, hunched stance of an uncomfortable, elongated teenager, Ryan is a regular 5'7", and even while dressed down in Seven jeans and polo neck, the fact that she's an absolute premium-quality fox is remarkably apparent (*Anna* knew that its instincts hadn't deserted us on this one). "I think maybe a lot of people in the car are just quite small," she opines. "Everyone expects me to be six foot."

Even in these depressingly celeb-saturated times, soap stars are still pushed into the public consciousness harder than most. Their almost constant presence on television is a two-edged sword for any actor. On the one hand is the elevated profile and all the attendant trappings of fame. But on the other lies the fear of typecasting both by directors and in the mind of the public. "It's so important when you leave that you do something different," Michelle says. "That you take your time and don't just go for the first thing that offers you a huge amount of money. You need to go for a project that you feel passionate about and which is going to show you in a completely different light."

This judgement is particularly relevant to Ryan as her estimable dramatic skills have set her far above the rest of the soap-world eye candy (not that we're trying to justify our love for her, obviously). She names ex-*Neighbours* star Guy Pearce - who went from sporting beefcake to *Memento* psycho - as a career role model, and while cagey about specifics she confirms that film scripts (both blockbuster and art-house) are already being sent in her direction from the US. ▶