

# From bionic to boards

Only a few years ago, she was bawling across EastEnders' famous Albert Square. Since then, she has starred in an American TV show and a number of feature films. **Nick Smurthwaite** finds out why Michelle Ryan is now returning to the stage in Northampton

**W**hen Michelle Ryan flew out to Vancouver to become NBC's Bionic Woman in 2007, most of us assumed she was lost to a life of unimaginable glamour, riches and round the clock celebrity. Yet here she is, three years on, back in the UK playing a supporting role in a play in Northampton.

Ryan fails to acknowledge any career malfunction, rather a change of direction brought about by unforeseen circumstances.

The play she is doing at the Royal and Derngate, Northampton, is a stage version of the 1999 film *The Talented Mr Ripley*, in its turn based on a novel by Patricia Highsmith. In the film, Matt Damon played the eponymous drifter who first befriends, then kills a charismatic young playboy (Jude Law) and proceeds to steal his identity. Ryan is playing the murdered man's American girlfriend, portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow in the film.

"It felt like it was a really good project to be part of," says Ryan, on the phone from rehearsals. "The character of Marge is complex, layered, fiery and sassy – perfect for me. There are so few strong female roles around you pounce on one when it comes along."

The last play she did was *Who's the Daddy* at the King's Head, Islington, four years ago after she had finished her five-year stint as Kat Slater's daughter Zoe in *EastEnders*.

"It feels right to be going back to the theatre now," says Ryan, who had no formal training as an actor. "I feel very comfortable with it all. I worked with a singing teacher at the beginning of this year which has helped me so much with my voice, finding the strength you need to do theatre. It was like I unlocked something through singing."

Does she think she could hold down a leading role in a stage musical?

"I guess I could, but I'm not sure it's something I'd want to do. I have been offered a couple of musicals but I think a stage play is right for me at the moment. Singing isn't really my passion, but maybe a musical on film at some point."

With her sensual features and athletic physique, it was clear Ryan was always destined for a life beyond Albert Square. Sensibly, she used the BBC soap as a launchpad for her career, though few would have

would one day morph into the ultra-glamorous Bionic Woman, leaping off tall buildings and despatching opponents with a flick of her wrist.

Did she always feel a sense of destiny about her acting career?

"I was a bit of a paradox as a kid," she explains. "On the one hand I was quite shy, on the other fearless and athletic. I loved to make people laugh. I used to direct my own little shows with my cousins and friends."

"In my teens, I joined the local drama group, the Stage Door Theatre Group in Winchmore Hill, and the lady who ran it, Lesley Pinner, completely turned me on to performance. She was so disciplined and passionate, a real inspiration to me."

At 16, Ryan turned her back on education – "I found school so closeted and confining" – landing a plum role in *EastEnders* after appearing in the children's TV series *The Worst Witch*.

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Growing up in the glare of press and public scrutiny can't have been easy, but Ryan says she was grateful to the soap for toughening her up and giving her a firm financial foundation.

Was she mentored by the older cast members of *EastEnders*?

"Not really. Nobody says 'Here is your mentor, now everything will be fine'. It doesn't work like that. People give you advice as you go along but it's only by seeing things from your own perspective that you can find a way through."

"In this industry, you are on your own. You have to be super-strong and aware, and set your own boundaries."

"Everybody is trying to find their way through it. It's an unstable

at. I feel now that I have people around me I trust and who know me."

She needed all her strength and self-belief to cope with the next stage of her career – being chosen to play the lead in NBC's revival of *Bionic Woman*, making an excellent job of it, and then having to deal with the crushing disappointment of its cancellation after eight episodes.

"It was great while it lasted and I had the best time doing it," she says. "I was under no illusions when I started. There was no guarantee it would be a success. Everyone got a bit carried away with the hype. I treated it like work, and there was a lot of stuff going on in the background, so ultimately it didn't really surprise me it was cancelled."

"The show didn't depend on my name so it wasn't that difficult to move on. I got lots of offers of action roles, but I didn't want to go down the same road."

"You spend a lot of time sifting through scripts and treatments, trying to find things that are going to test you and push you and take you forward."

Ryan has worked almost continuously since *Bionic Woman* imploded, playing a featured role in *Dr Who*, and making four films on the trot – *No Ordinary Trifle*, *Huge*, *4.3.2.1*, and most recently *Girl Walks Into a Bar*, in which she plays a Los Angeles stripper, due for release this autumn.

Did she consider moving permanently to the States?

"You go where the work is. At the beginning of this year it was LA, now it's here. My feeling is if they want you, they'll find you. A lot of it is down to timing."

"London will always be home – the culture, the theatre, my family, everything that makes me who I am is here, but there is definitely an excitement to working in America. I like the idea of dipping into it every so often, then coming back to the real world."

"The character I play in *The Talented Mr Ripley* is a gambler, but she doesn't mind losing. It's the playing that matters, and that's kind of my attitude to this industry. You roll the dice and it is impossible to predict what your next job is going to be. So long as it challenges me mentally and physically, I'm happy."

*The Talented Mr Ripley* is at the Royal and Derngate, Northampton.