Dark side of the Moon

Hermione Norris might be a hero to her kids for being in Doctor Who, but did the experience suit her?

Think Hermione Norris and you think decade-defining drama in Cold Feet, suppressed workplace passion in Spooks or her latest realistic take on the vicissitudes of childbirth, In the Club. You tend not to think of her bouncing around on the Moon. But actors will do anything for Doctor Who - especially actors with children.

"I have a ten-year-old and a seven-year-old," says the 47-year-old mother of two. "If the chance to appear in Doctor Who came up and I didn't take it, they'd never speak to me again. I took it for them; it's something they can watch and enjoy."

In Norris's case you might be forgiven for thinking the location proved a further incentive - the episode was shot in Lanzarote, the first time the show has filmed on the island since 1983. This time the stark volcanic landscape is doubling - very effectively - for the Moon. Norris plays "an ageing astronaut leading an expedition to the Moon... there are earthquakes, floods and tides that don't make sense down on planet Earth, so we're there to find out what's going on."

The switch from modern realist drama to the fizzy sci-fi camp of Doctor Who wasn't all that tricky, thanks to the spacesuit she was forced to wear for five long days shooting in the height of summer. Very little acting was involved...

"Oh... my... God," she recalls. "The costume was so challenging - they gave us T-shirts with the inside of a fridge wired to them so they could plug us in to a cooler because it was so hot outside. The visor was always down so we had ventilators to prevent the visor steaming up - in case the camera couldn't see you. You had to have cans on so you could hear the other actors. I couldn't get my visor on or off without someone else because it was so heavy... This was in 80 degrees of heat... it was like being in a greenhouse wearing a magnifying glass," she laughs. It's not only for the kids of course - "Doctor Who's an icon, isn't he?" she explains. "My Doctor was Jon Pertwee - yes, I am very old, thank you. I think I remember the title music of Dixon of Dock Green just before each episode but I'm not sure if I'm just remembering clip shows I've seen. I do remember the maggots of The Green Death - they were disgusting, and they're still disgusting in my memory. There was a horrible sticky noise when they were on screen."

She loves guesting - having been a series stalwart for so long in Spooks, Cold Feet and Wire in the Blood. "I've loved staying with a character for a long time, but there's something great about knowing you can just leave," she laughs.

She may soon find herself back in a returning show - In the Club has just been recommissioned by BBC1 for a second series. Kay Mellor's drama about women who meet at an antenatal class pulled in healthy ratings and critical praise - though Mellor isn't sure how to juggle the existing characters and new expectant mothers. If Mellor wants Norris, however, she'll be there.

"I've been a massive Kay Mellor fan ever since Band of Gold caused such a stir," she enthuses. "I think she's a huge ambassador for women. She knows what she wants and she knows how to entertain and that's quite rare these days. Although,
‘This was in 80 degrees of heat... it was like being in a greenhouse wearing a magnifying glass’

In the Club was another role with a clumsy costume – that fake belly was a bit of a nightmare. As you’re not really pregnant, you don’t have the spatial awareness that would actually come if it really was you, so there was a lot of bumping into things and people.”

Norris was glad that Mellor’s show seems to mark a return to original drama. “There’s a bit of a slavish copying of Scandinavian drama at the moment, which is a bit disappointing,” she says. “Everyone wants to make the same thing. But I think people really enjoy watching old-school drama – shows with flawed human beings doing the best they can in their messy lives. That’s what people identify with. Well, I have to be careful what I say or I’ll get myself into a tangle.”

She’s always had a reputation for speaking her mind – enhanced in March when she revealed that actors’ fees had fallen on TV since Cold Feet in 2003, when she was earning a reported £75,000 an episode for the final series. “There’s quite a bit of Asda Smart price going on in my life,” she said at the time, which caused quite a stir. Norris and her husband, writer and producer Simon Wheeler, have two homes, in Dorset and London, where they live with Wilf and Hero. So she’s avoiding anything controversial for the moment.

“Right now, it’s about getting the balance right,” she says, “especially for an actor. Your life can turn on a phone call and I’m not really in a position to turn much work down, which can be hard on the people in your life. This year I’ve been in the Cotswolds, Leeds, Lanzarote and Wales – and I’ve got children at school... so it requires organisation.”

Her character in Doctor Who didn’t get the balance right: “She’s been wanting to go to the Moon all her life. She dedicated her life to that one thing and it doesn’t do her any good. If you do that, there’s a lot you’re missing out on.”

So come Saturday, will the whole family settle down together in front of the TV set to watch her roam Lanzarote? “I’m sure we will,” she says awkwardly. “Well, I’ll probably...” she trails off. “The thing is I’m just never very good at watching myself with other people,” she sighs, then laughs. “But look, I’ve got to give it a try. I mean, it’s Doctor Who!” STEPHEN ARMSTONG

This week’s story sees Doctor Who return to Lanzarote – specifically the eerie Timanfaya National Park – for the first time since 1983. On that occasion, filming took place for Planet of Fire, an adventure for the fifth Doctor, Peter Davison (above, with then-new companion Peri played by Nicola Bryant). The island played itself and doubted for the volcanic planet of Sarn, scene of a showdown between the Doctor and the Master.

The 1980s also saw shooting take place in Amsterdam for Arc of Infinity (1982), and Spain for The Two Doctors (1985), in which sixth Doctor Colin Baker was joined by second Doctor Patrick Troughton to defeat the Sontarans. It proved a problematic production: wigs were lost and the heat made make-up melt.

The first story to be filmed abroad was City of Death in 1979, a Paris-set story that also attracted the highest viewing figures of 16 million. The four-part caper saw Tom Baker’s fourth Doctor and Time Lady Romana (Lalla Ward) gallivanting around the Eiffel Tower and the Trocadero to unravel a plot to steal the Mona Lisa. The following year the actors were married.

RTS’s Alison Graham joined eighth Doc Paul McGann on set in Vancouver, Canada, for a big-budget bid to revive Doctor Who in 1996, following its cancellation in 1989. “The new film has none of the endearing amateurishness of old,” she wrote. But it would be another nine years before the show was properly rebooted.

The first overseas shoot for the new era of Doctor Who was in Rome for 2006’s The Fires of Pompeii. Since then the show’s been to Dubal, Croatia (doubling for both 16th-century Venice and 1890 Provence), Utah, Spain again and New York (right) where Matt Smith’s Doctor took Amy and Rory. MARK BRAXTON

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