

THE AVENGER FIGHTS BACK

Diana Rigg won't be interviewed by a woman – and she takes no prisoners in the battle of the sexes, discovers Andrew Duncan

CLASSIC POSE

Diana Rigg was Mrs Emma Peel in 51 episodes of *The Avengers* from 1965 to 1968



ACTING CLASS

Diana Rigg as she is today, at 74, and (right) with daughter Rachael Stirling in *Doctor Who*



Doctor Who

Saturday 6.30pm BBC1

GOOD NEWS TODAY of a surprisingly joyful encounter with Dame Diana Rigg, now 74, sometimes thought of, unfairly, as difficult with an explosive temper. But there's a potential problem.

"Why am I here?" she asks, gazing around the plush, so-called "withdrawing room" of a London hotel. "*Doctor Who* [in which she and her daughter Rachael Stirling appear together this week, and the reason for our meeting] has millions of viewers so why do I have to promote it? No one can make me do it, nor indeed do anything. I should have asked myself these questions before I arrived. And," she adds smiling, "I dread interviewers who have done any homework because then I have to deny misconceptions printed about me. But I'm very polite and if you make money from this, I'm deeply thrilled."

She won't be interviewed by a woman. "They're capable of being much more bitchy than men. You have to admit that. Most women won't agree, but it's true. I read some of what they write and think, 'Dear God, this is awful.' I remember an interview with Hillary Clinton in the *Daily Mail* where the writer described her 'howling like a coyote on heat'. Isn't that repellent? I love women but am aware we're dangerous and deeply competitive, although I gave up being competitive long ago. Feminists deny it and Germaine Greer, in her inevitable fashion, would turn it into intellectual argument, but basically it's all

"You can't pat bottoms, though. You deserve to be slapped for that"



about men and sex – 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the prettiest of us all?'"

There's some good news for women, though: on account of pheromones they are much more successful at trout fishing, one of her erstwhile hobbies. "Fish leap onto our rods," she explains.

This is surprising from an icon of feminism in the 60s. "I was thought to be, but never was really. I kept my mouth shut for the most part. It's a question of economics. If you're paid the same as a man, which now you are in this profession, you're equal. If a man holds a door open for me or pulls back a chair so that this old bag can sit down, I'm delighted. If they put an arm round a woman and say, 'You look good today,' they could find themselves in the small claims court. Women who moan and carp about that sort of thing are stupid. They find it belittling, but it's just good manners. You can't pat bottoms, though. You deserve to be slapped for that. It's condescending. I wouldn't allow it."

SHE SPENT HER early years in India, where her father was a mechanical engineer, and at seven was sent to a Quaker boarding school in Buckinghamshire, which, she says, made her feel an outsider – "no bad thing". When she was 12, her parents took her to see Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, which inspired her, and at Rada she trained as a classical actress before joining the Royal Shakespeare Company where she soon became a rising star, so much so that when she took television parts, she was considered to be selling out.

"I just wanted to do something larky for a change. At the time no one understood the power of television." One of her earliest TV experiences (*The Hothouse*, 1964) was "a harsh introduction, a blow to a rather tender ingénue. The director was horrid to me. He kept saying, 'You're not on stage now.' I thought, 'Why does no one like me?' Directors can make or break actors. Harry H Corbett [her co-star] was terminally depressed. It was the days when everything was live, with cameras swishing around on the floor. I must have got it right, but I was terrified."

Then came *The Avengers* in which she played leather-clad, karate-chopping Emma Peel for two years in the 60s. "I wasn't prepared for everyone looking and wanting to know all about me. It frightened me. Surely what's on the screen should be enough? Journalists leapt into my car as I drove off. I did nothing to stop them. I was a patsy and had to learn the hard way where to draw the line."

Her co-star, Patrick Macnee, said she told him she considered him and her driver to be her only friends on set. "Nonsense. Patrick is a darling man. Doesn't always get it right. He married a rather fearsome Hungarian lady and moved to Palm Springs."

"I've always been deeply grateful to *The Avengers*. There's this >

< ridiculous story I turned my back on it. It's true I'm not big on reunions, and fans get miffed when I don't turn up, but it made me well known worldwide. I'd have had to spend 150 years touring to get such an audience. Fully grown, not to say 'mature', gentlemen, come up and say, 'I saw you when I was a boy.'

"I don't mind getting older, but people don't tell you it's painful. And if you're acting, you can't afford to show it. I had a knee operation not long before I did *Doctor Who* so I wasn't terribly mobile but I had to be, which is no bad thing because you force yourself to exercise. I saw Billy Connolly doing a sketch about the noises old people make getting out of a chair, so now I shed the years and spring out silently."

LAST YEAR SHE was named Hottest Bond Girl ever for *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969). She's been married twice – first to Menachem Gueffen, an Israeli painter, from 1973 until 1976, and then to Archibald Stirling, a theatrical producer, from 1982 until 1990. I wonder if she misses having a man in her life. "God no. Stop it. I'm not going to answer. *Radio Times* readers don't want to know about my sex life. Sorry. That makes me laugh."

She and her daughter by her second marriage, Rachael Stirling, 35, are mother and daughter in this week's *Doctor Who*, specially devised for them by writer/actor Mark Gatiss. "We're only doing one – so far. Of course, there could be more."

"I've met women who are hungry for every part – sad cases!"

I worked with Mark [in *All about My Mother* at the London Old Vic]. He was playing a transvestite and I was a right raving dyke, er, lesbian. We got on terribly well with much laughter. Then he worked with Rachie in *The Recruiting Officer* and got the idea of writing something for us. We'd never worked together before and this was the first offer we'd had. It's such fun, really lovely. I'd never thought about being in *Doctor Who*. There's something wonderfully English about it. It has a huge following. Children get hooked and that stays into adulthood.

"I was born in Doncaster and Mark refers to me as 'D of D' – daughter of Doncaster. My character has a northern accent. Heaven! Rachie and I had great difficulty keeping a straight face in some scenes. Hopefully we're believable. I play a horrendous old bag who wants to take over the world. I love playing old bats. Rachie's character is blind, which was pretty painful for her because she had to wear opaque contact lenses. Horrid! She was very brave."

"I don't think there's any competition between us. Each generation has to re-interpret the great parts for themselves, which is why the theatre



HOT FOR BOND

Diana Rigg and George Lazenby (as 007) in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* in 1969



DRESSED TO IMPRESS

Diana Rigg in *Game of Thrones* (above) and in *The Avengers* (right)

TAKE THE RIGG QUIZ!

1 Diana Rigg was a Bond girl in 1969. Which other *Avengers* stars have been in which 007 movies?

2 What was the name of the alter ego of Mrs Peel (Diana Rigg, right) in *The Avengers*' risqué episode, *A Touch of Brimstone*?

3 In which BBC1 series from 1989 did Rigg play a dangerously obsessive matriarch?

ANSWERS
1: Honor Blackman in *Goldfinger*, Joanna Lumley in *OHMSS* and Patrick Macnee in *A View to a Kill*.
2: The Queen of Sin
3: *Mother Love*

remains fresh. It was mad to resist her desire to act. I say, 'Go ahead, do your stuff.' I've handed her the baton, but as any mother will tell you, 'Keep your mouth shut.' She does what she wants, is strong and good, and has my total approval.

"Please don't make me out to be tough. I never had specific ambitions, and was always grateful for whatever I was offered. I don't want to be complacent. I'm grateful for a perfectly wonderful career, and I can't complain about anything. I've done an incredible amount of television. No one will remember – well, perhaps you might – *The Sentimental Agent* [1963]. It was one of the first detective series. It was supposed to be in an exotic foreign location, but we filmed in Chertsey, with potted palms. You could get away with that in those days. I still work a lot and absolutely love it. It engages your mind, emotions and body."

"I'm going to Dubrovnik – I love travelling – for a second series of *Game of Thrones* [the Sky Atlantic drama in which she plays the Queen of Thorns]. She's a cunning woman with a sharp tongue, another power-mad old bat. Actors are very lucky that an audience comes along and is prepared to believe in us. It's an act of faith. But your career cannot be your life. I've met women who are hungry for every part and don't feel they exist unless they have a series of jobs lined up. They imbue acting with an importance which, frankly, it doesn't have. Sad cases."

SHE'S ANYTHING BUT sad, wearing a pert beret, black jacket and trousers, smiling a lot. She smoked 20 cigarettes a day from the age of 18, but gave up in 2011. In her late 20s she briefly tried cocaine and amyl nitrate, as was the fashion, as well as therapy, which she gave up after three sessions. Vanity is pointless and beauty a diminishing asset, she says.

It's been a full and varied career with many theatrical highs – especially, she says, *Medea* in 1992, which won her a Tony Award for Best Actress. "This morning I had an invitation to discuss a Jacobean drama, *Women Beware Women*. I wondered why. Then I remembered I'd been in it and completely forgotten. I was obviously very bad. Whenever I've done things I know to be bad, I try to wipe them from my mind. I never made any good films – well, just one, *The Hospital*, long forgotten [1971]. The rest were rubbish. You look at people, in all walks of life, and wonder, 'How did they get there?' You and I have to scramble around at the bottom. No one listens to us. But they should."

"Alas and alack, you've done your homework, but you have to admit we laughed quite a bit. You can't take it seriously. That would be totally unnecessary."