Smile for the Doctor

Could the Time Lord, Matt Smith, and his new assistant, Jenna-Louise Coleman, be the sexiest double act in the history of Doctor Who?

By Stefanie Marsh

PHOTOGRAPHS Mark Harrison STYLING Jane Taylor Hayhurst
Is the Time Lord a tease? ‘For my Doctor,’ says Smith, ‘it depends on the woman’
deep in the vaults of a smart photography studio in North London, Britain's most fancied humanoid alien does a two-step with his new girl, Clara. The Doctor — for it is the 11th Time Lord of whom I speak — has already (see the last Christmas special) kissed Clara (on the lips!), a moment so monumentally significant that even the man who plays him, Matt Smith, later "lets slip" that this kiss has been his favourite moment on Doctor Who in his three years as David Tennant's successor.

The Doctor's previous companion, you will remember, was Amy Pond, the tall, ginger, Scottish one, always waylaid by domestics with her on again/off again husband, Rory. Though Doctor No II and Amy were bound by mutual respect, they were never destined to experience the fizzle-pop of interplanetary sexual tension. Theirs was a meeting of minds of the platonic, brother-sister variety. Now, Amy has exited stage left. In her place is the gamine, wide-eyed Clara Oswin Oswald, played by Jenna-Louise Coleman. Clara has action boots and likes to wear them with sexy dresses in pillar-box red. She flirted outrageously with the Doctor in December — as suggestively as it is possible to be on TV before 9 pm. Producer/writer Steven Moffat and co originally imagined her as a Mary Poppins character but, Mary Poppins being rather eunuch-like, this turned out to be only one of her incarnations. She's now "the girl who can". Do what, is the big question? I predict that Doctor Who fans won't be able to say "sonic screwdriver" for very much longer without blushing.

The new series starts next week. Even to hardcore science-fiction fans, the ones fascinated principally by Doctor Who's gadgets, it is obvious that something is up. The world is on tenterhooks. Will they? Won't they? Does the Doctor even have a sex drive? Ladbrokes should start taking bets. So many mysteries, besides the universal ones concerning the long hoped-for defeat of the Sylphien (natives of the planet Raxacoricofallapatorius, of course) or the Ogrons (ape-like mercenary hominids, as you will know).

So, I ask Coleman, as casually as possible considering the potential significance of her answer, do they snog again in the new series? "Steven doesn't want us to say," she says, carefully. I nod understandingly at her tact, but think she means yes.

The Doctor seems to have some relationship issues. In 2010, he was briefly engaged to Marilyn Monroe (but claims the wedding didn't take place in a legitimate chapel — the cad). And I can exclusively reveal here the surprise return on the scene of his ex-wife, River. Is it presumptuous to detect a love triangle in the offing?

Coleman, 26, originally of Blackpool, formerly of Emmerdale, latterly of the four-part Julian Fellowes television drama Titanic, plays Clara as a feisty upstart. She was head girl at her old school in Blackpool, but didn't go to Oxbridge as was perhaps expected of her. Instead, she worked in a bar and took classes up to the Edinburgh Fringe. After Emmerdale, she took off for Los Angeles for three months; she wasn't getting the meetings with directors in London, and America was a better place to practise her auditioning skills. On her return to Britain, she sacked her agent and found a new one. Things began to look up; as well as Titanic there was a small part in the film Captain America: the First Avenger. At some point in 2011, she landed Richard Madden (Robb Stark in Game of Thrones) as her boyfriend.

Last year, she entered the prefrontal cortex of all teenage boys when readers of FHM placed her 91st in its annual 100 Sexiest Women poll. What did she find most offensive: being cast as a masturbatory fantasy or her low ranking on the list? At 91, she only just beat breakfast presenter Kate Garraway. What did she think when news broke of her arrival on said "hot list"? "I'll never know, Coleman, apparently, had simply no idea that she was in the poll at all — a lie, I'll wager, but one for which I'll forgive her.

Matt Smith will later show me how fame has forced him to walk down the street in public — he looks like the tuberculosis-stricken Egon Schiele in his self-portraits: head down, a quick, evasive, almost scuttling walk, hunched with his favourite beanie pulled down low over his forehead. Coleman optimistically thinks she can carry on being inconspicuous. "I'm convinced that because I'm shorter, I won't get recognised," she says. It is an interesting, plainly misconceived, theory. But she is wise to be discreet in interviews. Smith-spotting has spun so out of control of late that he is thinking of moving to New York, where he's less frequently recognised. Not for long. I might add. American actor Ryan Gosling has just cast him in his directorial debut, How to Catch a Monster, alongside Eva Mendes and Christina Hendricks.

Two days later, in a building off Berwick Street, Central London, I have been stuffed into one of those tiny, featureless spare rooms that all office blocks contain. They're usually used by employees to make private phone calls. Beside me, perched on a stool by a wall mirror, is a PR woman, and across a small table from me is Matt Smith, his hair more au naturel today; whatever it was sledged back with for the shoot has been violently tousled out. He wears normal jeans, a normal...
T-shirt. Everything about him comes across as normal. Three furry rows across his forehead now give him just the right amount of gravitas to have soothed the worrywarts who, in the early days of the 11th incarnation, spent long hours on Doctor Who forums fretting about Smith, 26 at the time, being too young for the part. He is enthusiastic, boyish, puppyish - however you might describe a person who will never willingly settle into pretentious middle age. Serious, too. And digressive. But also the kind of man whose natural charm and bashfulness would have his girlfriends’ mothers calling him “a lovely boy”. We’ll get on to how fanciable he is later.

First we need to talk about God.

“There are a lot of things written about me that are not true,” says Smith. He speaks with the laid-back candour with which he seems to disarm everyone he meets, including Noel Gallagher the other evening - “when Britpop and the Time Lord collide”, the tabloids reported, wondering why they were wearing “matching” leather jackets. (Answer: “He’s a cool dude, Noel. We had a beer together and that was it.”) The jackets, though both made of leather, were unidentical. That’s what’s written about you that’s not true? “Well,” he says, “give me an example of something that you think is true and I’ll tell you whether it is or not,” at which point my mind goes temporarily blank. Jesus, I say - sorry for swerving - let me think...

“Jesus isn’t swearing,” corrects Smith.

Yes, it is, I say. Just then, I remember a supposed fact about Smith. It’s been reported that he’s an atheist. “That’s true,” he confirms. “Are you a Catholic?” he asks me. No, “I think the theatre is one of the most important parts of it,” he says. “I think the church... the sense of community... the ceremony is really valid.”

“At my lower school, we prayed,” Smith says. “I think about it all the time. I believed in God. I believed there was someone looking down on me. And I used to go and pick up litter because I thought God was watching.” He thinks about it some more, picturing the obedient, pious, frightened and tidy little boy he once was. “It was really weird.” I go, “God’s watching, I’d better put it in the bin.”

It is one of the more striking aspects of Smith’s career that he could have been a professional footballer - he was at Nottingham Forest and Leicester City youth academies. That is to say, much as you might be tempted to lump him in with all the “I’ve always dreamt of being an actor” posh boys on our screens these days, he is nothing like them at all: possibly why people like Noel Gallagher can stand him. He is extremely animated and keen on impromptu demos (see: beanie. And, later: ears), but describes himself as “a diplomatic man”. Because? “I have to be.”

Moffat was looking for for play the 11th Doctor. “Doctor Who?” the tabloids chortled when, in January 2009, Smith’s casting was announced.

All of a sudden, the door to our private cubicle swings open. A girl with a giggle lays some Twix bars carefully before our precious Time Lord. “Oh, wow,” he exclaims. “Look at that! Twix! The stary demands...”

The chocolate-delivery girl lets out a high-pitched squeal, betraying the fact she fancies Smith. She vanishes, no doubt to text her friends about this fateful crossing of paths.

We now career unstoppable back and forth through time and space: back into Smith’s early childhood, in Northampton; forward into the man bag he carries with him everywhere and from which he will later extract his new favourite book, Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil; sideways on to thoughts about his hero, Brian Clough; and back into the little white room, back on topic, where he will eventually speculate about what makes women fancy the Doctor so much.

His secondary school was a state comprehensive, Northampton School for Boys. He rose to become - career requirement? - head boy, his intention to seize control of the “party” fund, gain access to the school turntables (he wanted to be a DJ) and skip the more tedious aspects of the curriculum - “It got you off triple psychology on a Thursday.”

He sustained the back injury. His ambition to play in front of 80,000 people in a football stadium was destroyed. Anything must have been a comedown after that, even the University of East Anglia (drama and creative writing), where the teenage Smith enrolled, but which he found less than stimulating, leaving early in search of professional acting jobs.

Shortly before he started university, Richard Dawkins turned him into an atheist: he read The God Delusion, then went through a phase of asking all his religious friends why they believed. An actor friend explained it as “grace and serenity, faith in something”, and that seemed to make sense to Smith. “I have faith in Blackburn Rovers. You know, you go to a football match and, if they win or lose, I invest faith in them... So I didn’t want to disparage anyone for their faith. Now I have great respect for religion. But I am an atheist.”

We try our best to move on to more frivolous subjects but we get waylaid by books, Smith’s cue to retrieve from his bag Beyond Good and Evil. Why is he reading Nietzsche? I wonder if this isn’t a prop. Perhaps he’s done his homework. Perhaps he has found out that my mother is German and snuck off, to Waterstones to buy a copy, figuring it will go down well with a half-German journalist. Actors do that kind of thing - they make highly competent mirrors. You can have what you think is a wonderful, mutually amusing and satisfying conversation with an actor,

**His grandfather helps sort his fan mail. The first letter he opened was “very blue”**

Anyway, who knows what might have happened to him had his drama teacher not taken him aside (this was before a back injury put paid to his football aspirations) and told him he had to be an actor. The same teacher then cast Smith in a play and “forced me to jump up”. He later more or less held a gun to his head to persuade him to apply to the National Youth Theatre. One of the first plays he did there was The Master and Margarita, earning him an agent. Next came the National Theatre, then the role of Lockwood in Alan Bennett’s The History Boys. He won the London Evening Standard’s Best Newcomer award for his portrayal of Henry in the Polly Stenham play That Face, at the Royal Court, which deals with alcohol and drug addiction in a middle-class family. He did a fabulous job as a swotty parliamentary researcher in the BBC drama Party Animals. It is a shame that it wasn’t recommissioned, despite critical acclaim (the ratings weren’t there), but I expect we should be grateful. Had he become a star in Party Animals, he would not have qualified to be the relatively “unknown” actor Steven

Smith with ex-girlfriend
then later realise they were merely being nice, exercising what I think of as benevolent minciry. "Nietzsche has interesting views on truth," he says, "and very interesting views on women. Mad, sometimes."

Three years before the wits at FHM were compiling its 2012 hot list, the brains behind Company magazine were putting together their own "best of" ranking: Britain's Most Eligible Men. Smith came in at No 26, but denies he is unusually fanciable. "It's a weird and strange and remarkable thing," he says instead, "and, do you know, it's nothing to do with me."

One cannot help but roll one's eyes when actors come out with such cobbled. "It's the character in the show," he insists. He tries to pad out his hypothesis, but he's pattering out... "But," he protests weakly, "the fan mail exists for all the doctors. This is true. However, women aren't renowned for their crushes on sci-fi characters. "No," he says reluctantly. "Well, OK," he grumps. "Point proved."

So Smith is a doddle, we can agree. Here is a case in point, straight from the horse's mouth. Smith's mother has been put in charge of her son's post. Sometimes his grandfather lends a hand. The first time he did this, it happened. "The first letter he ever opened... was what he described as 'very blue'... But he has a wonderful sense of humour, my grandad. So he gets this letter and it opens with, 'I want to... you know.'"

You know what?
"Well, you know, there was something and..." - for clarity, Smith mouths the offending word, but does not say it out loud - "and all that stuff involved. It was pretty graphic. But anyway, she was about 40 or 50 and asked me to go to her house in Essex. I think it was, and you know, 'take care' of all these things that she was describing. My grandad wrote back: 'Matt isn't available, but I'm his grandad and I am.' That's just one example."

Perhaps our unidentified middle-aged Doctor Who—mad sex kitten of Essex can soothe the itch by buying some merchandise. An 11th Doctor frocked batrobe with printed woe screwdriver chest-pocket detail will set her back a mere £30. Or she can drown her sorrows instead drunk from a Tardis mug (with removable lid). Beyond children's shows, the merchandise phenomenon only seems to happen with sci-fi. You don't get it with period drama or homely detective series. People may enjoy watching Lewis, but they don't go to conventions dressed in drab suits and put on Geordie accents in homage.

Back to the subject at hand: Matt Smith, heart-throb, shares his thoughts on fellow hottie Daniel Craig. Not in the same league, Craig fans will snort: let's see how Smith would fare in a Craig/Smith tight-pair-of-swimming-trunks face-off. Nonetheless, hunky Craig is the actor that skinny Smith identifies with most. "He came into Bond about the same time I came into Doctor Who, and for both of us it was: 'He can't be James Bond. I'm too young.'"

Smith watched the Bond film only the other night; it was "just brilliant". He felt relieved, vindicated even. "I was really pleased that everyone was laughing at Craig now. Because I kind of empathised with him."

When Smith played Burt Bushnell, the Olympic rower who helped the British team strike gold in 1948, in the BBC drama Bert and Dickie, some people whisked that he was too "weedy" for the role. Others disagreed: Smith is how rowers used to look in the days before Steve Redgrave. He is the old-fashioned, sensible British physique: rangy, tall, skinny, borderline puny; a look sported by male hippies beneath their silly boards and by pop stars. And favoured by high-end models. Smith used to go out with Daisy Lowe. Is he seeing anyone now? "That is something that I wouldn't want to talk about in this environment, if it's all the same to you."

"I've got big ears... Yeah, I'm vain. I think so - I'm an actor, for God's sake."

blame him. Some of the papers got so obsessed with him and Lowe that their entire intimate life became documented in long-lens pap shots. He says that at the beginning of Doctor Who he felt exposed and struggled. "Of course, I felt the pressure of it. I said to myself, 'If you can get through this, you can get through anything.' I rang my dad and said, 'I don't know what I'm doing with this,' and he just said, 'Keep going, son, keep going. You can do it.' And he gave me real confidence." He says any actor must trust their creative instincts. "I always commit to them and, right or wrong, you live or die by them. And I try to be truthful to the part. It's like Hamlet. There's only one version you can ever play."

Some women have a crush on Hamlet. Others prefer pernicketiness, 1,000-year-old aliens. Come to think of it, hasn't it always sounded vaguely suggestive? "The Doctor will see you now? Hasn't the character always been a bit of a tease? For my Doctor," says Smith, "it depends on the woman..." No, he then decides, the Doctor is not a tease. "I think my Doctor is slightly more asexual than some of the others. He is fascinated by human behaviour, but he doesn't necessarily understand it, be that cooking or women or..."

Perhaps he has Asperger's, I posit, tactlessly. "No, he does not," replies Smith, a mite crossly. "That's too easy a choice. 'Oh, someone's strange, let's give them Asperger's.' It's because he's an alien and he doesn't understand. But, but - animated - he gets involved and he gets it wrong, and ultimately that's funny."

Smith's Doctor is confounded by humankind. "I mean, he's 1,000 years old and he sees people who meet at 30 and stay together for 40 years. With one person. Marriage." From the sound of it, marriage is on Smith's mind as much as it is on the Doctor's - that is, not at all. A creature after Smith's own heart, then. "So you stay together and you have children and that's it? To the Doctor, that's completely baffling."

Does the Doctor want to have kids? There was a suggestion several series ago that he once had some. Perhaps he wants to settle down. It could make a good anniversary special: the Doctor Who Wedding. "No," Why not? "I think the burden of his life and what he has to do... He can't ever commit to that." A big deal has been made by Steven Moffat of Smith's chin. When Clara came on the scene, she flirtatiously mocked the Doc for its enormity. I wonder whether the on-screen version is prosthetic. His chin looks quite unobtrusive in real life. "That's what my mum tells me, but that's not what my best friend tells me, or Steven Moffat. I've got big ears, too."

Smith pulls back some tufts of hair. "Look! The ears look normal. You don't have big ears, I say. Smith is not to be contradicted on this subject, however. "I do. I have big ears." Is he vain? "Yeah, I think so - I'm an actor, for God's sake. I think actors have a very interesting relationship with vanity; you need a little bit of it, but you need to leave it at the stage door. I read that in a book."

Books - the key to a woman's heart? When I suggest that perhaps girls fancy the Doctor because he's unavailable, Smith says he thinks it's more likely they're attracted to him because of his brain. "He's the cleverest man in the universe, bar none."

So women go for that - brains?
"Yeah. Don't they?"
Is that why you read Nietzsche?
"No. I read Nietzsche because I'm interested in philosophy."

Nevertheless, the Doctor seems to have concocted the perfect girl-magnet formula. "Cleverer and less available. Yeah. Ha. I should probably take a leaf out of his book on that.”

I think the only thing he needs to do is be flirted with outrageously on screen by a woman as self-confident as Clara and as attractive and talented as Jenna-Louise Coleman. They have the makings of a dream team. Ratings will be up. Housewives of Essex, stand by."

Doctor Who returns to BBC One on Saturday March 30