

WHO-DUNNIT?

There's a classic murder mystery when the Doctor and Donna meet crime writer Agatha Christie... and this one has a real sting in the tale



When *Radio Times* calls Felicity Kendal for our interview, it's almost perfect that the former star of *The Good Life* and *Rosemary & Thyme* is "in the middle of a garden centre in the country. And we've had a flood, but there you go."

So we hook up an hour later, once Kendal has returned to London, where she's starring in Noël Coward's *The Vortex*, in the West End's Apollo Theatre until 7 June. That play and her *Doctor Who* story, *The*

Unicorn and the Wasp, are both set in the 1920s. Any similarities, then? "They're both richly written – the dialogue in both is lovely and funny and witty and real – but the stories couldn't be less similar, and that's probably on purpose because one doesn't do the same thing twice," Kendal replies.

Admittedly, Gareth Roberts's *Who* tale does involve, as the title suggests, a unicorn and a wasp (a giant one), as well as upper-class ladies and gentlemen embroiled in a murder

mystery attended by the queen of crime fiction herself, Agatha Christie.

Kendal plays Lady Clemency Eddison, host to Christie (Fenella Woolgar) and a cast of suspects that includes – as well it should – a vicar. "She's a romantic woman with not a great deal of brains," Kendal explains of Lady Eddison. "She's rather of her period, very much a country lady. And she's a bit mysterious. She has a slight penchant for insects. And she likes a tippie, but that's because her life hasn't turned out the way she wanted it to."

Speaking posh didn't faze Kendal ("I automatically speak very straight English, so I don't think I have a problem with pronunciation") and neither did acting to "nothing" when required to face a giant wasp, which would be added by computer later (see overleaf). "If they say, 'This is what you have to imagine,' you tend ▷

Who's who

Gareth Roberts, the writer of this week's episode, gives us a guide to the house guests

▼ **ROBINA REDMOND (Felicity Jones)**
"Robina is the hit of the social season, everything's absolutely spiffing for her. But what's she hiding in her handbag?"

▼ **HUGH FORBES-CURBISHLEY (Christopher Benjamin)**
"The husband of Lady Eddison, confined to a wheelchair. What is he poring over in the study?"

▲ **LADY CLEMENCY EDDISON ▶ (Felicity Kendal)**
"The formidable head of the house and host of the party that will end in murder. One of Agatha's biggest fans. But why has she kept one room locked?"



▲ **AGATHA CHRISTIE (Fenella Woolgar)**
"A dazzling crime novelist, her six books have won legions of admirers. This is the day she disappeared..."

◀ **REVEREND GOLIGHTLY (Tom Goodman-Hill)**
"The vicar of the local parish, the Rev Golightly is meek and mild. But is he tougher than he looks?"

QUICK, WHERE'S THE SWATTER?

BEFORE



BEFORE



BEFORE



"Getting the wasp/Vespiform to smash a window is tricky," says Will Cohen of visual FX company The Mill. "Trying to time the CG [computer-generated] wasp against real breaking glass is time-consuming. It's easier to film the breaking window as CG, too."

"The Vespiform is based on a real wasp," explains Cohen. "Insects have a very alien look, anyway. There are a few modifications, though. The head and the way it holds itself have been made to look more dramatic – and it's got a giant sting, of course!"

"If the CG is behind the characters, we have to use a green screen so we can cut them out and place them on top of the CG. If the CG is in the foreground, we can just place it on top of the live action."

AFTER



AFTER



AFTER



to imagine it. It's only an extension of what you're doing all the time. If a collection of people are all facing the same blank space going, 'Oh my God, that's terrible!', you tend to join in with it."

Even the thought of the universally loathed wasp failed to ruffle Kendal's feathers: "I know people run away screaming, but I grew up in India, so insects aren't a big deal with me, I suppose. There was one on my hand driving back [to London] today and I just put it out of the window."

Richard Briers, Kendal's on-screen husband in *The Good Life*, was in an episode of *Torchwood* earlier this year, so did she talk to him about appearing in sci-fi?

"It's rather sweet that we're both doing something similar. But I was in theatre last year and then again this year, so I haven't actually been watching a lot of television that isn't on very late at night."

And will she have young relatives watching on Saturday? "I have. People are more impressed that I've done this than most things that I've done. All sorts of young people will be watching it thinking that I really am the bee's knees now. So I feel that I've made it!"

While Kendal has only dipped into the odd Christie, the writer of her episode, Gareth Roberts, is a huge fan. "Right from the moment I could read," he enthuses. "Some of her books I read so long ago, I've forgotten who did it."

write simple prose, but to write simple prose that's gripping is very difficult." Roberts, who penned last season's bawdy, Bard-y romp, *The Shakespeare Code*, focused first on the era. "We couldn't decide initially whether Christie should be young or old," he says. "When someone says, 'Agatha Christie' to you, you immediately think of an elderly lady. But her disappearance [the author mysteriously vanished for ten days in 1926] was just too tempting, so it's set firmly during the time of that disappearance."

The Unicorn and the Wasp – which even sounds like a Christie title – is a whodunnit with a Time Lord thrown in. Given a cast that involves two Felicitys, a Fenella and a Goodman-Hill, it's also very British. "We don't see posh people that much on television any more, except at Christmas," suggests Roberts. "And it's kind of odd to be writing a *Doctor Who* where people are talking in cut-glass accents."

"She's a brilliant writer, very good at character. And brilliantly simple prose. Anyone can

Even the Doctor and Donna? "They do try to fit in. The thing about the Doctor is that he can command confidence, authority and respect wherever he goes, and the great thing about Donna here is that she's so excited to be in a murder mystery. As you would be!" he laughs.

While stressing that his script isn't remotely tongue-in-cheek, Roberts explains further, "When I saw the finished episode, I was quite taken aback by how different it was in some regards. Because of the genre. Little things have a lot of emphasis in whodunnits, and little things never have any emphasis in *Doctor Who* – nobody ever says, 'Your hair looks nice!' or 'Ooh, what's in your handbag?' In *Doctor Who*, when somebody speaks it has to be significant or relevant; there's never any slack."

"The murder mystery plays by different rules. I think this will intrigue people, because it's different." **Nick Griffiths**

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