



Rachel Talalay and Benedict Cumberbatch on the set of the new season of *Sherlock*

THE RETURN of the VANISHING DIRECTOR

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AFTER BOX OFFICE FLOP **TANK GIRL** DERAILED FILMMAKER **RACHEL TALALAY**'S CAREER, SHE'S BACK, DIRECTING **SHERLOCK**, **THE FLASH**, AND **DOCTOR WHO**. HER NEXT MISSION? TO EXTERMINATE HOLLYWOOD'S GLASS CEILING.

[By]
CLARK
COLLIS

It's been ALMOST THREE

MONTHS SINCE RACHEL TALALAY BEGAN SHOOTING THE PREMIERE OF the new season of *Sherlock*, and even now she is still on a high from working with Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman on the beloved PBS *Masterpiece* sleuth series. "The fact that it takes three years to get them together long enough to be on the series and then be invited to direct it is phenomenal," she says. "It's a tremendous experience on every level."

It's just the kind of experience Hollywood told the 57-year-old she'd never get. Although the original, unaired *Sherlock* pilot was directed by a woman—Coky Giedroyc—Talalay is the first to oversee a full episode of the series, and she describes the gig as "a massive feather in my cap." In actuality, though, it's the latest of several. Over the past few years, this self-confessed nerd has directed *The Flash*, DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, and four episodes of *Doctor Who*, including last year's acclaimed "Heaven Sent," basically a solo showcase for star Peter Capaldi. "She will get the best out of any scene—technically, dramatically, visually, and emotionally. She excels at getting beauty and drama to flourish in our punishing schedules," says Capaldi.

The director's achievements are doubly impressive given her history. In the early '90s she was a Hollywood up-and-comer. Then she made *Tank Girl*, a postapocalyptic action-comedy with a feminist streak as wide as the armored vehicle driven by Lori Petty's titular character. Released in 1995, the movie recouped just \$4 million of its \$25 million budget. Talalay admits such a commercial failure would be a black mark on anyone's résumé but believes the fact that she hasn't made a major studio film since has more to do with her gender than her talents. "So many men fail and then get their next opportunity," says Talalay. "I didn't." She claims this wasn't the first time her gender adversely affected her career, and her dream of making another big Hollywood movie could remain just that at a time when around 88 percent of film directors are still men. "[Women] can do anything and everything," says Talalay. "It's crazy that the statistics are so terrible."

Born in Chicago and raised in Baltimore, Talalay spent long spells of her teenage years in the U.K. thanks to the peripatetic career of her father, renowned cancer researcher Paul Talalay. While in Britain she embarked on what would prove to be an enduring obsession with *Doctor Who*. Later, as a mathematics student at Yale, Talalay was offered a job at IBM but instead went to work



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as a production assistant on *Polyester*, the 1981 cult classic by John Waters, who became a mentor. ("She was thrown into a world of complete lunacy that I don't think Yale had prepared her for," Waters recounts. "It was very much an independent movie. The neighbors were calling the police, trying to get rid of us. But she handled it really well.") Soon after, Talalay got a job as an accountant at New Line Cinema, which was about to break into the big time with Wes Craven's 1984 horror classic *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The problem? Talalay didn't know anything about accounting. "They said, 'Can you do it?'" she recalls. "I said, 'Yeah, sure.' I just figured it out."

Talalay swiftly rose through the New Line ranks, ultimately becoming a producer on 1988's *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4* before reteaming with Waters on 1988's *Hairspray* and 1990's *Cry-Baby*. (The director also officiated Talalay's wedding to British film producer Rupert Harvey, with whom she has two daughters.)

Talalay made her directorial debut with 1991's *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, the sixth movie in the franchise. The film grossed an impressive \$35 million but did not prove to be the career launchpad she expected. "Coming off the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, the three directors before me all went on to huge action films," she says. "I wasn't afforded the same opportunity and I feel that was absolutely to do with my gender." In fact, the director of the fourth Freddy movie, Renny Harlin, went on to direct the lavishly budgeted *Die Hard 2*, while her immediate predecessor in the director's chair, Stephen Hopkins, was hired

to make *Predator 2*. Talalay's next film, meanwhile, was the obscure sci-fi thriller *Ghost in the Machine*.

In the absence of big-studio offers, Talalay took destiny into her own hands by optioning Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin's ultrahip comic *Tank Girl*—which follows the adventures of a boozy, buzz-cut, no-crap-taking outlaw—and selling it to United Artists. While the shoot was tough, her real problems began when the studio excised a large amount of footage, including one scene that showed off Tank Girl's collection of dildos. "I feel [*Tank Girl*'] the precursor to *Deadpool*," says Talalay. "We were really ahead of our time." But the film's failure torpedoed her career. "Utterly, completely in Hollywood jail," she says.

Talalay relocated to the U.K., where she produced the children's film *The Borrowers* and found work as a TV director. By the start of the aughts, she was back in the States, paying the bills, if not necessarily satisfying her soul, by directing shows like *Ally McBeal* and *Cold Case*, while discovering she'd lost out on jobs because certain

CLOCKWISE FROM
LEFT | Peter Capaldi
on *Doctor Who*;
Tank Girl; Talalay
(left) on the set of
*Freddy's Dead: The
Final Nightmare*
with Lisa Zane



casts and crews didn't "like" women directors. "That was a very common thing I heard from my agents," she says.

The roots of Talalay's current renaissance date back to 2005 and the BBC's revival of the long-mothballed *Doctor Who*. "The minute I watched it, I called my U.K. agent and said, 'I need to do this show,'" she recalls. Talalay met with *Who* producers on a couple of occasions, but to no avail. In between, she sharpened her fantasy and sci-fi chops, directing episodes of *Supernatural* and Syfy's *Haven*. Finally, as the *Who* team was gearing up to shoot the 2014 season, Talalay put together a reel of visual F/X and action scenes she had directed and sent it to executive producer Brian Minchin. Impressed, Minchin and his fellow EP, head writer Steven Moffat, hired her to direct the two-part season finale. "The first thing they do is say, 'Would you like to go on the TARDIS?'" Talalay told EW at the time. "You're like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

Moffat, who is also a co-creator of *Sherlock*, was helpful to Talalay when it came to getting the gig for its season premiere, too. Further helping her cause? She had directed *Sherlock*'s other creator, the Mycroft-playing Mark Gatiss, in a 2006 TV-movie version of *The Wind in the Willows*. Like the *Elm Street* franchise, *Sherlock* has proved a career-enhancing showcase for many of its directors, but Talalay is aware that this once again may not apply to her. When not in the TARDIS or at 221B Baker Street, the director can be found at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where she teaches film. In June, Talalay was honored as Woman of the Year at the Women in Film + Television Vancouver awards. In her speech, she recalled meeting with her agents to talk about post-*Sherlock* ambitions: "They said, 'Yes, you have done *Sherlock*. Yeah, the other *Sherlock* directors have all been offered pilots and features off the back of it. But remember, you are a woman.'" Though she points out that her reps were simply being realistic, Talalay admits she was crushed.

Despite (or because of) it all, Talalay is determinedly upbeat about securing a future for herself and for women filmmakers in general. Last year, she directed *On the Farm*, the true-life story of a Vancouver serial killer and the marginalized women he murdered and terrorized. She made the film for Canadian TV, but it's beginning to play festivals, and she hopes it will be distributed theatrically. "I'm still fighting," Talalay says. "I'm on a mission with Marvel to get them to give me one of their big films—I would really love to do *She-Hulk*. I really, really want to direct *Game of Thrones*." Sounds like her agents' suggestion that she manage her expectations has fallen on deaf ears. "I feel that part of my career was repressed after *Tank Girl* and many opportunities were not afforded to me," she says. "I want them back." ♦

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