Interview by E Jane Dickson

12 weeks that changed my life

She hit the headlines by bringing sex appeal back to the Tardis, but who is the real Karen Gillan?

Doctor Who
Saturday 6.40pm BBC1, BBC HD

I’m thinking. I really am. I’m racking my brains,” says Karen Gillan. The classical chin-on-hand thinker’s pose is offset by poison-green nail varnish. As she concentrates, one long leg winds tightly about the other, slim and supple as the limbs of an elegant octopus. But it’s no good. Gillan is stumped. She cannot come up with a single downside to fame.

It’s three months since the red-haired, 5ft 10in Scot first climbed aboard the Tardis and the escalating profile of Doctor Who’s latest companion is approaching warp speed. Magazine cover shoots, personal appearances and almost daily puffs of tabloid outrage - the kind of outrage, requiring extensive photo-coverage, that’s reserved for exceptionally pretty girls in short skirts - have all been taken in Gillan’s athletic stride.

“It’s weird,” she says, of her crash landing on Planet Famous, “but nice-weird. It feels like you’re being monitored a bit more and I really wasn’t prepared for that kind of attention. Of course, it’s strange to wake up and find journalists staking out your house, but no one’s been nasty. And it’s not like I’m cowering inside, scared to put a foot wrong. “I went on the Tube the other day at night, and no one looked twice. Bit of an anticlimax, really. I can use public transport depending on the time of day - if there were a lot of children around, it would probably be impossible. But that’s not something you can worry about. I mean, Doctor Who is just the most brilliant job. I’m not going to take that for granted and start moaning about ‘the cost of celebrity’.”

Surfing on adrenaline, Karen “Kaz” Gillan is the original breath of fresh air. When she giggles - and she giggles a lot - it’s not so much nerves as sheer good nature. None of which disguises the best-foot-forward determination that, at 22, has made her Britain’s most bankable new talent.

Having left home in Inverness at 16 to go to drama school in Edinburgh, she went on to appear in Rebus, Stacked and The Kevin Bishop Show - as well as playing a soothsayer opposite David Tennant’s Doctor in The Fires of Pompeii (2008).

But as Amy Pond, she’s raised the game of the Doctor’s companion from sidekick to genuine co-star. There’s a classic screwball energy in her professional relationship with Matt Smith -
that knocks sparks out of the screen. “Actually,” she says, as if confessing to a great cheat, “it’s the same off screen. We just kind of bounce off each other. The banter that you see on screen – that’s what we’re like all day on set. I sometimes wonder if it’s our way of keeping our energy up between scenes, but it’s all subconscious. And I think we might have been like that if we’d met in any other situation.

“The one thing I never wanted to do with Amy,” she goes on, “was to base her on any kind of formula, to conform to what works – or what has worked – in a companion; you know, the whole, likeable, girl-next-door business. Amy is likeable, I hope, but she’s not ordinary. She’s quite complicated and there are layers to explore. So I was taking a few risks with her and I think it works.”

Crucially, Amy jumps the line from camaraderie to frank sexual attraction. A scene in last month’s episode Flesh and Stone, in which she attempted to seduce the Doctor, was sufficiently steamy to attract the attention of Mediawatch-UK, the successor to Mary Whitehouse’s public morals protest group, while some viewers on Doctor Who internet forums felt that Gillan’s short skirts – she made her first appearance as a kissogram cop – and general sexiness were inappropriate to the BBC’s flagship family show.

“Yeah,” says Gillan, “I guess there was a bit of an uproar and I really didn’t see that coming. I just don’t get it with the skirts. It’s what any girl on the street is wearing. I mean, Amy’s not a schoolgirl, she’s 21, pretty much the same age as me, and we all wear stuff like this.” As if to prove the point, Gillan does the elegant octopus thing again – a kind of sitting-down twirl that shows her own striped mini-dress to advantage.

“I wouldn’t say Amy and I have the same style. There’s a kind of non-matching thrown-togetherness about Amy’s costumes that says she doesn’t spend a lot of time on her appearance. Her outfits really say something about her and I think that’s what an outfit should do – it’s making a statement about who she is.”

Nor, insists Gillan, is Amy’s occasionally suggestive behaviour toward the Doctor in any way unusual. “It’s part of who she is, but it’s quite a small part. She’s a normal girl with normal impulses. I suppose I find it hard to define the relationship between Amy and the Doctor – I think we all do – because there are so many aspects to it.”

So, will they or won’t they? On balance, thinks Gillan, probably not.

“Ultimately, I think they’re like brother and sister – he’s quite protective of her and they bicker like siblings do, but ultimately they’d do anything for each other. Sometimes, though, she’s attracted to him, and that’s when things get a bit more complicated. I don’t think he sees her like that at all. I think he basically still sees her as the little Amelia he met when she was seven. So when she kisses him, he’s like, ‘Ooh, this is all wrong,’ and she’s like, ‘Why isn’t he reciprocating?’ So she pushes it a bit, just to test her power. But in the morning, she’s back to being his annoying little sister again.”

Above all, the relationship between Amy and the Doctor is a relationship of equals – or as equal as a relationship between a 21st-century girl and an alien can get. Former companions have been more politicised – notably Sarah Jane Smith in the 1970s was a card-carrying feminist with outfits to match (see overleaf). But Amy, like Gillan and her generation, takes equality as “the absolute baseline”.

“Feminism is not the issue any more, not for me, anyway. It’s just never occurred to me that a woman wouldn’t be equal, in any sphere, to a man. It’s nothing that has ever come up in my life and nothing I’ve thought about in terms of Amy. She’s just a strong girl, woman, whatever. Oh, let’s just say she’s a strong female. And I really like that she gets to drive the plot sometimes and gets her own story lines. She’s not just standing around in awe of the Doctor all the time. I mean, I can ‘do’ awe,” laughs Gillan, falling seamlessly into an attitude of slack-jawed wonder, “but it’s just not in me to hold it for long.

“I guess Amy’s default attitude is ‘Come on, impress me’. And she’s not going to mope around when the Doctor’s not there – she’s going to do her own thing, whether it’s fighting monsters in strange new worlds or just getting on with her life in her own village. I really loved the episode [Amy’s Choice] where she’s ▲
married and pregnant. I grew really attached to that pregnancy bump – I’d catch myself rubbing it. But I was quite happy to take it off at the end of the day. I suppose I realised I’m not ready to be pregnant!”

Nor is she ready to discuss the impact of her new-found pin-up status on her private life. “Och no,” she says, smoothing away a blush with the flat of her hands. “Let’s just say I’ve had lots of nice letters, some lovely letters, but my relationship with my boyfriend [photographer Patrick Green] is exactly the same as it always was. I don’t really talk about him, because I’m sure he’d rather not be talked about, but all the Who craziness hasn’t affected us at all. We still go to the same places and see the same people.

“In fact, nothing in my life has really changed, except that I’ve got this really great job and a bit more money. And to have that sense of security at this age and stage of my career is a very nice feeling. Though, actually, I’m rubbish with money. I don’t think I’m mentally extravagant, but every so often, I’ll go out and buy really nice things and deal with the consequences later.

STONE ME
Stonehenge, River Song (Alex Kingston) and the head of a Cyberman... What does it all mean for Amy and the Doctor in the epic two-part finale?

I can’t drive, but I’d quite like to own an Aston Martin or something. If we’re going all-out, I’ll have a chauffeur with it! Then I can sit in the back and play my iPod. But that’s fantasy territory – I don’t know if that will ever happen.”

As fantasies go, it’s not so far-fetched. America, where Doctor Who has a vast following, already can’t get enough of Amy Pond and the call to Hollywood is surely a matter of time. “Do you know, there really hasn’t been time to think of all that,” says Gillan. “We start on the new series in a couple of weeks and I’ll be filming for nine months, so I can’t even get into talks about anything else. Once I’ve finished Doctor Who, I’m just going to have to see what the world has to offer!”

There’s neither cockiness nor false modesty here, but Gillan’s smile is not without a hint of challenge. “Come on,” it says. “ Impress me.”

WHAT MAKES THE PERFECT COMPANION – HAS AMY POND GOT IT ALL?

SEX APPEAL
POLLY (Anneke Wills) 1966–67
After an initial run of frumps and urchins, Polly was the first sassy modern woman in 1960s Doctor Who. No dumb blonde, posh Polly worked as a PA at the newly opened Post Office Tower and hung out at London’s hottest nightclub – Inferno. It was as if Julie Christie had suddenly stepped aboard the Tardis.

Does Amy match up? √

BRAINPOWER
ZOE HERIOT (Wendy Padbury) 1968–69
Zoe was the first companion to bring dazzling intelligence into the equation. Belying her teenage demeanour, she was a highly educated astrophysicist from the late 21st century. She frequently outsmarted her friends, once saying, “The Doctor’s almost as clever as I am.”

Does Amy match up? X

(But even the Doctor rarely topped Zoe!)

RESOURCEFULNESS
SARAH JANE SMITH (Elisabeth Sladen) 1973–76
A freelance journalist with a nose for trouble, plucky Sarah was a liberated 1970s woman who didn’t take no for an answer. Decades later, she’s still saving the Earth in her own CBBC series The Sarah Jane Adventures (where she’ll be teaming up with 11th Doctor Matt Smith this autumn).

Does Amy match up? √

BRavery
LEELA (Louise Jameson) 1977–78
“You will do as the Doctor instructs or I will cut out your heart.” No one messed with Leela. Armed with a dagger and deadly Janis thorns, this noble savage was the most fearless and intuitive of all the Time Lord’s allies.

Does Amy match up? /

COMPASSION
ROSE TYLER (Billie Piper) 2005–2010
Impulsive Rose was the perfect woman to help a despondent ninth Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) rediscover his joie de vivre. She empathised with the last of the Daleks and went back to the 1980s to save her dad’s life. Rose fell in love with the tenth Doctor (David Tennant) – an emotion he reciprocated for the first time.

Does Amy match up? √