TIME LORD

Exclusive interview with Jodie Whittaker – the first female Doctor Who
“Don’t be scared by my gender. Doctor Who represents everything exciting about change”

Jodie Whittaker

The first female Doctor

When I meet Jodie Whittaker she is dressed entirely in black. A black ribbed top, black skinny jeans, black ankle boots. No nonsense. We’re sitting in the library of the Charlotte Street Hotel in central London, which is cozy, with tapestried couches. Amid the chintz, it feels like I’m taking a panther to tea in a doll’s house: she has a huge presence, this down-to-earth Yorkshirewoman. There is a firmness to her. You don’t mess with her.

In the hit crime series Broadchurch, her character was labelled the most terrorised woman on British TV (her son was murdered by a family friend), but she was never tragic, never a victim. There’s very little of the vamp in her, but with her huge eyes and voluptuous lips, there’s a trace of an everywoman who can do anything — including take on the role of the first female Doctor. In December, she made her debut in the Christmas special when Peter Capaldi regenerated into Whittaker’s 13th Doctor. The role has already been a game-changer. Even as TV’s most terrorised woman, she was rarely recognised in public. People now come up to her in the supermarket and ask for selfies. She takes on this new fame gamely — as long as it isn’t too invasive. “People have been absolutely lovely so far. The other week in Cardiff I could see this little lad plucking up the courage to talk to me so I made it easier, ‘You all right, mate?’ So, I know it made his morning, I’m actually fine with that. People are lovely, but I am very private, which is possible as long as you stick to certain things. I still get on the Tube, but I might start wearing a hat.”

Taking the lead part in the BBC series has huge implications for her career. “I think I have been really lucky. Doctor Who definitely puts me on a level where if I go into a meeting I probably don’t have to say what I have been doing for the past few months.”

She had a code name for talking about Doctor Who with her family and agent before her role was announced. “It was ‘the Clooney,’” she says. “To me and my husband, George is an iconic guy. And we thought, what’s a really famous iconic name? It was just fitting.”

Although taking on the role felt overwhelming, she revelled in the idea of working on a series that existed before she was even born. “It’s wonderful and I absolutely love it. As a family we didn’t watch it except at other people’s houses. But I was much more aware of it when it came back with Christopher Eccleston, David Tennant [who co-starred with Whittaker in Broadchurch] and Matt Smith.”

Did she feel daunted when trying out for the part? “No,” she beams. “I went to the audition excited, but I always walk into the room with an attitude of ‘I sound like this, I look like this, but, believe me, I can do it!’”

She isn’t shy about revealing her favourite Doctor. “David [Tennant], of course, because I know him. I think he was amazing. But there is no right or wrong, there are no rules.” What does it feel like to play the first female Doctor? “It feels completely overwhelming; as an actor, as a woman, as a feminist, as a human, as someone who wants to continually challenge themselves and not be boxed in by what you’re told you can and can’t be. I want to tell the fans not to be scared by my gender because this is a really exciting time and Doctor Who represents everything that’s exciting about change. The fans have lived through so many changes and this is only a new, different one, not a fearful one.”

The male Doctors have tended to become very close to their female companions; there was often a hint of romance. Is her companion male or female? “I’ve got three companions, two boys and a girl. Everyone is a different age.” But is there romance? “I’m only a few weeks in, I don’t know the answers to quite a lot of questions yet.”
Whittaker, 35, sounds as if she’s never left Yorkshire, although she’s lived in London since drama school, where she met her husband, Christian Contreras, an actor and writer. She also spends time in Los Angeles. “Not for work,” she shudders. “Just because my husband is American and he often works over there.” Her roots are evident in her choice of words. She says she is sometimes “mardy” and has to remind herself to think, “What would 10-year-old me do? They wouldn’t complain that it was freezing or whatever. They’d be a pig in shit, so stop moaning. I’m not a big complainer. If I’m annoyed, people will know where they stand. If I’m upset, I’ll be crying, and if I’m happy, I’m proper happy. I don’t have a filter or a poker face. But, strangely, I can do it with work. If you need me to be somebody I’m not, I can manage that.” She laughs — a proper laugh.

Her first film after drama school was Venus, with Peter O’Toole. She was 24 years old. “I spent an entire press junket trying to convince people that the director hadn’t found me at a bus stop having a fight with a mate. He found me via my agent. I left drama school early because I got a part in Mark Rylance’s last season at Shakespeare’s Globe in 2005. I finished at the Globe in September and started Venus in November. I had a mindset that was naive but helpful. The mindset was ‘This acting lark is fun, isn’t it?’, rather than one filled with trauma and rejection.”

She puts this down to her parents. “I was brought up in a household where you were celebrated for what you could do and you were never shamed for the things you struggled with. There was no part of my upbringing that suggested I needed to focus and get a proper job. There was no telling me what I wanted to do was ridiculous or unrealistic.” There was no family tradition of acting, so you wonder where this brilliant creature came from. “No acting in the family, nothing, just the love of film. I was far too young to watch Jaws, but I did — I loved being exposed to Spielberg and cinematic adventure.” She cites Some Like It Hot as an inspirational movie from her childhood. “I must have seen it about 500 times when I was young.” Did she want to be Marilyn Monroe? “I think I wanted to be Jack Lemmon — I liked the journey of that character. It was phenomenal.” She is probably the only female I’ve met who could watch that movie and identify with the man who dressed up as a woman.

In her latest film, Journeymen, she plays the wife of a boxer who sustains a serious head injury during a fight. It’s not of the Rocky kind — there’s no triumph over tragedy — it’s more a quest to survive. A lot of the themes, even by Whittaker’s standards, are “harrowing” and she found some of the filming “excruciating”. Referring to her character’s strength, she says: “It’s not like me. It’s quite a graceful strength, an elegant strength. She was much stronger than I could be.”

Paddy Considine, who directed Journeymen, also wrote the film and plays the part of Matty the boxer.

“What was brand-new for me,” says Whittaker, “was being directed by someone who was in a scene with me and who had written it. I would ask, ‘When it’s my close-up, will you be there or behind the monitor?’ He was there. I was a bit worried about it. It sounds daft, but actors don’t give other actors notes. It’s a respect thing, so I thought it would be weird having him say, ‘Don’t do it like that,’ but he doesn’t direct like that, so it was fine.”

She says she has never wanted to direct. “I don’t have a vision. I have never wanted to be a writer because I don’t want to be in a room by myself. I don’t know the answers or the bigger picture, but I don’t mind someone saying, ‘That doesn’t work, why don’t you do it this way?’” She loves being part of a team. “Growing up I played squash, hockey and rounders, but not netball because I couldn’t cope with standing still. I like watching teams in the Olympics — everyone is individual, but it only works because they are all in something together. I love relationships with other actors and directors. Doctor Who is very collaborative — it is a very exciting job.”

Just before Christmas, a picture of her Doctor Who outfit was released. It’s quite clever. It acknowledges the heritage of previous Doctors, but it is its own entity — there’s a T-shirt with a rainbow stripe, which echoes the multicoloured scarves of previous Doctors, petrol-coloured trousers with braces, and multiple earrings in the shapes of stars and planets. In the days that followed the release, social media endlessly pondered its meaning.

After the BBC gender pay gap story broke in the news last year, Whittaker revealed she had fought to be paid the same as Time Lords past. She is likely to earn between £200,000 and £249,999, the same salary Peter Capaldi received, according to the BBC’s annual report last year. Back then, Whittaker said: “It’s an incredibly important time and equal pay is a notion that should be supported — it’s a bit of a shock that it’s a surprise to everyone that it should be supported.”

She has avoided engaging in the debate online — she doesn’t post on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. “I don’t want to know what people think about me. Sometimes when I am really passionate I would love to throw my voice, but perhaps I am too argumentative and would say something immediately offensive.”

Does this mean she missed all the posts about the Doctor Who announcement, including the one that asked “Who needs a Tardis full of bras?” “Well, I’ve missed that good stuff. Who does need a Tardis full of bras?” she laughs — a proper laugh.

Journeymen opens on March 30. Doctor Who returns to BBC1 in the autumn

The Sunday Times Magazine