Christmas, Victoria style

Jenna Coleman

plus Daisy Goodwin on how to have a royal knees-up

Inside your 52-page television special for the festive season
Jenna Coleman tells Ed Potton how much she loves playing the monarch for ITV – apart from the corsets

J
enna Coleman, who is about to resume playing our second-longest reigning monarch in a Christmas special of Victoria, once met our longest-reigning monarch – in front of the Tardis.

It was during Coleman’s previous job, playing the Doctor’s spiky companion Clara Oswald in Doctor Who. The Queen was attending an event at the BBC and the Blackpool-born actress was in line to shake hands.

“She said, ‘What do you do?’” Coleman recalls with a grin. “I said, ‘I travel through time and space.’ And she said, ‘That sounds like fun.’”

Coleman, 31 in Earth years, is still traveling through time and space in Victoria – just a rather narrower portion of it. She sees clear parallels between the queen she has met and the one she has played since 2015 in the ITV series. “Growing up on the job, being a symbol of endurance.” Like Elizabeth, Victoria knew what it was like to be “in and out of favour” – you kind of take it for granted that it was a stable time, but it really wasn’t.

Sipping herbal tea at a hotel in Kensington, central London, Coleman is tiny, pretty and porcelain-skinned in grey sweater and chic black dungarees. Combine her luminosity with a wit and earthy zest that she honed in soap operas and you have a very different kind of Victoria from the dumpy matriarch of popular perception.

“People just don’t know the younger person at all,” she says in a voice that still has its Lancastrian twinkle. “The only photographic images we have of her are when she’s older. It’s hard to connect those with her younger self, full of life and romantic.” There’s also much Sachs-Coburg sensiness in this Victoria’s relationship with Albert (Tom Hughes), like The Crown – the Netflix series about Elizabeth II, which Coleman “inhaled in a weekend” – this show has given us a hot young royal couple who shag each other.

The difference is that Coleman is also with the dashing Hughes in real life.

Bring up the subject of their relationship, however, and her playful tone is replaced with a distinctly regal fröideur. Hughes has been similarly tight-lipped in previous interviews. Have they made a pact not to go into detail about their relationship? “Yeah, it’ll make life easier just to not talk about it,” she says quietly. Still, it’s hard not to wonder how much of their private dynamic ends up on screen. Daisy Goodwin, the creator of Victoria, described Victoria and Albert as “the Burton and Taylor of the 19th century.”

“Something else was mainly because we had a bedroom scene where we had a massive post-dinner argument and Daisy was like, ‘I bet it’s like Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf with tiaras.’ Coleman says. “You’ve got so many resources – it’s very easy to come to the set and hopefully bring their dynamic. They’re complete opposites on paper, there’s something that should completely not work. But their relationship was incredibly turbulent and passionate. It’s an intense relationship inside a goldfish bowl.”

Coleman and Hughes must know something about that; there has been much media talk about whether they’re engaged. So, are they? She holds up ten bare fingers. That’s not a no, I say. “Ha ha ha.”

We return to safer ground, the new Victoria special. “It’s a good show for Christmas,” she says. “You’ve got the cards, the trees — and Victoria on ice, which is quite a funny sight.” The special explores the royal couple’s contrasting views on the festive period, she says. “In Victoria’s childhood there was a lot of holly and mistletoe and that was kind of it; Albert is fixated with this perfect family image, which comes from his own broken childhood in Germany. He’s got a really lovely line about wanting everyone to feel whole. You realise it’s very unrealistic, there’s no such thing as a picture-perfect Christmas.”

This episode also features the extraordinary and “utterly true” story of Sara Forbes Bonetta, who was born in Nigeria, saw her parents killed in war, was sold into slavery and presented as a child to Victoria. The queen was in raptures by her and her new adopted daughter.

“Her relationship with Albert was incredibly turbulent and passionate”

paid for her upbringing and education in Britain and Africa before she died of tuberculosis at 37. Coleman sees Forbes as another in the line of people who become very close to the Queen for a relatively short time. There was also Lord Melbourne, played by Rufus Sewell in Victoria; John Brown, the Scottish servant played by Billy Connolly in the 1997 film Mrs Brown, and Abdul Karim, her Indian confidant in the recent film Victoria & Abdul.

“It always seemed to be one person at a time — these intense friendships that she clung to,” Coleman says. The queen was drawn to people who didn’t despise her, she thinks.

Coleman has seen Victoria & Abdul, and thought it was “brilliant”, but hasn’t met Judi Dench (“I’d love to just hang out with her, I think she’s hilarious — she’s got a naughty glint”). She also loved The Young Victoria, the 2009 film with Emily Blunt, which overlaps a fair bit with her own series. “I know a lot of people try to avoid other incarnations, but I find it really helpful. The way the court moves, going through doors, the etiquette, when it all seems very seamless, but there’s such a regime involved.”

Every little helps, she thinks, because Victoria “was a really tough nut to crack”. Mastering the voice was one of the hardest things. “You didn’t want something that was too removed. Apparently she had a very slight German accent, but I thought that might be taking it a bit too far.” Then there’s the clothes. “Honestly, the corsets! I think I want to go on a corset ban.” She hopes the story ends well: “Victoria has the more forgiving they will be.

Victoria will be one of two TV appearances by Coleman on Christmas Day; she also has a cameo in the Doctor Who Christmas special. Will she be watching? “Well, in the world of Sky Plus, "she says with a smile. She’d love to see Doctor Who, given that it’s the swansong of Peter Capaldi as the Doctor and Steven Moffat as showrunner. Fortunately, the schedule won’t force her to choose.

So, will she be with Hughes over the holiday? “I think we’ll be one last go.”

A raise of the eyebrows, “I’m spending Christmas with my family.”

Coleman grew up in Blackpool, where her father refitted shops and her mother stayed at home. She caught the acting bug at school and was auditioning for drama school for a second time when she won the part of Jasmine Thomas in Emmerdale. She got some meaty storylines in her fourth years on the soap: lesbian love scenes, an abortion, killing a would-be rapist.

Roles in Waterloo Road and Julian Fellowes’ Downton Abbey came before she was cast in Doctor Who, partly on the strength of her rapid-fire chatter. Moffat said that
and so full of life' 

How Albert invented Christmas

Daisy Goodwin, writer of Victoria, hails the prince as a founder of British holiday traditions

In 1848 The Illustrated London News printed an engraving showing Victoria, Albert and their five children gathered round a fir tree, lit up with candles and decorated with gingerbread. For a country that had tended to view Christmas as an excuse for drunkenness, this was shocking. So much so that Cromwell banned it — this picture of a happy family gathered round a tree, where a tureen of wassailing under the tree swept the night, was a revelation. A burgeoning middle-class who lapped up Dickens's A Christmas Carol and were ready for the rebranded winter solstice: the Christmas tree.

We have many things to thank Prince Albert for: the museums of South Kensington, the modern university curriculum, the Royal College of Organists, but perhaps his greatest contribution has been the glorification of Christmas, with a little help, of course, from Mr Charles Dickens. For Albert, Christmas was one of the few happy times in his fractured childhood. In his childhood home of Coburg people followed the Lutheran tradition of bringing a fir tree inside and lighting it with candles. When Albert married Victoria he brought his German traditions with him. In most couples there is usually one person who takes Christmas seriously, and the other, and in this case it was Albert. The Queen associated Christmas with the miserable childhood in Kensington Palace, spent her Christmas in the bane of her childhood, Sir John Conroy. Yet as their family grew, Albert’s enthusiasm for Christmas began to take the curse off it for Victoria. Here she is writing early in their marriage in 1843: “Christmas, I always look upon as a most dear happy time, also for Albert, who enjoyed it naturally still more in his happy home, which mine, certainly, as a child, was not. It is a pleasure to have this blessed festival associated with one’s happiest days. The very smell of the Christmas trees of pleasant memories. To think, we have already 2 Children now, & one who already enjoys the sight, it seems like a dream.”

The scale of the Albertian Christmas would give a Russian oligarch pause. Albert wasn’t content with one Christmas tree, at Windsor Castle, where the royal family generally celebrated Christmas, he set trees standing on tables or “altars” heaped with presents for each member of the family (with nine children it must have been like a forest). There was yet another enormous tree that Victoria and Albert had decorated, especially those who, in compliance with royal wishes, “had shown themselves desirous of helping all the servants”, according to The Era in 1847, one of the many newspapers that breathlessly chronicled every royal moment: “The distribution took place in the Riding School at Windsor Home Park. The building was decorated with banners, flowers and evergreens: The Queen and members of her family attended with their New Year guests from the Castle, sitting in the gallery. The poor entered by the west door, moving to the centre where the supplies were handed to them by local officials. Sometimes members of the royal family tasted the plum pudding and walked amongst the stacked tables to see the ‘interesting proceedings’ at closer quarters. The poor left by the eastern entrance beneath the Queen’s gallery, each, as they walked up the building, laden with their gifts, respectfully acknowledging to the Queen their kind benevolence.”

Victoria didn’t have the luxury of a recorded Christmas broadcast, so public acts of charity were her way of broadcasting her Christmas message. It’s a measure of just how different Victoria and Albert’s family-centred Christmas was from that of Prince Albert’s. Christmas was one of the few happy times in Prince Albert’s fractured childhood.

Coleman was “possibly the only person I’ve ever heard go faster than Matt [Smith]. It was the first time we were going, ‘My God, Matt’s trying to keep up!’” You should see me when I’ve had a coffee,” she says. “I went into an audition with Matt and I was like, ‘God, this guy is like a tornado.’ You need to just dance with him.” Victoria arrived just weeks after she left Doctor Who. “All I thought was, ‘I don’t want to go into another long series job!’ A pause. ‘That didn’t go well!’ Movies remain a long-term interest, though. Coleman had a small role in Captain America: The First Avenger (she played the date of Cap’s best friend) and a slightly bigger one as Emilia Clarke’s sister in the weepy drama Me Before You. She’s off to Los Angeles soon to have what are referred to as “meetings”, although she’s not sure she wants to do another blockbuster, having done lots of effects-heavy stuff in Doctor Who. “I don’t really love green screen — I like working with other humans.” Her immediate future, though, is dominated by Victoria. The plan is to stay with the character through the decades, as The Crown is doing with Elizabeth. “I think so, yeah. It would be a travesty not to,” she says. While Olivia Coleman is poised to take over from Fiji in The Crown, her namesake has no plans to relinquish her crown in Victoria quite yet. “We’re just working out the timing. If you go too fast you miss all this amazing detail like Sara Forbes, but if you go too slow it takes for ever.” She laughs. “I only take it so far, though, and then I’ll probably dematerialise into someone else.” Off to travel in space and time once more.

Victoria is on ITV on Christmas Day at 9pm