

By Julian Critchley

HOW JOANNA LUMLEY GOT THE PART OTHER GIRLS COULD NOT REACH

Television's "Purdey" once wanted to become prime minister, a brain surgeon, pilot or an actress. She settled for the latter





I am past the glittering prizes. To what do the middle-aged aspire when life has become a matter of setting tiny victories against major defeats – a new set of golf clubs, a German motor car on the firm, or lunch with Joanna Lumley? This last at least I have had. I polished my boots and set out for Hertfordshire; it is not every day that one lunches with a woman who, according to a popular women's magazine, has already refused 53 proposals of marriage.

Miss Lumley won fame as Purdey



Three actresses together (above): Joanna Lumley works on a portrait of Kate Fahy while her friend Jane Carr looks on. Filming gets under way (left) for the television series Sapphire and Steel, in which Joanna Lumley stars

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Photographs by Graham Harrison

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Three actresses together (above): Joanna Lumley works on a portrait of Kate Fahy while her friend Jane Carr looks on. Filming gets under way (left) for the television series *Sapphire and Steel*, in which Joanna Lumley stars

in the television series, *The New Avengers*. She is tall, arrow-slim, graceful, as beautiful as Diana and quite as sharp. I travelled to Mount Olympus by way of Boreham Wood.

Purdey was the blonde who kept her cool. She was the still centre of a programme of stylised and fantastical violence in which sinister foreign agents of the sort one finds in vodka commercials threatened to expropriate England's few remaining assets. They were foiled invariably by the suave Mike Gambit; or by John Steed, whose dandified appearance and bowler hat carried the comfortable

message that, despite the evidence, the playing fields of Eton still count for something; or by Purdey, who looked like a lady but did not always behave like one. But what more suitable riposte is there to a cad, and a foreign one at that, than a daintily-executed karate chop?

La belle Lumley was the fourth in a line of clever girls who, like Nelson's storm-tossed ships, stood between England and her enemies. Honor Blackman, Diana Rigg and Linda Thorson all did their bit; but Miss Lumley is the last of the line; the series is now finished.

We lunched together in Lew Grade's canteen, which is not a gastronomical experience. It is a mess for officers and other ranks where the haddock was hard and the creamed rice as close as one will get to Ambrosia. We drank half a bottle of champagne. Miss Lumley, whom I had watched earlier filming an episode in her new series *Sapphire and Steel* – which is to be shown twice a week for 14 episodes, beginning next month – tucked into an omelette as she had forsworn meat and fish for a time. In the same spirit the waitress forgot to bring my veg.

Sapphire and Steel is a ghost story of sorts. The other ghost is David McCallum, who was once the Man from Uncle. Shaun O'Riorden is the producer and P. J. Hammond the author.

My first glimpse of Miss Lumley was on the platform of a railway station



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set. She was fetchingly dressed in a long Edwardian skirt, high-necked blouse and straw hat, and was swathed in clouds of studio smoke. Dimly I made out a young soldier dressed for the trenches. It seemed a cross between *Brief Encounter* and a psychic

variant on *Upstairs Downstairs*.

Later I was shown the first episode. The two principals fly in from space to comfort two small children whose parents have vanished into thin air. It is all very eerie, with clocks which mysteriously stop ticking and nursery

rhymes which conjure up unpleasant spectres from the past. Miss Lumley plays it straight until, towards the end, she becomes a quick-change artist, varying her clothes (and wigs) at will for the delectation of one small boy, played by Milo O'Shea's son, Stephen.



Time off from a busy filming schedule – Miss Lumley with a pony tail cleans the car on an afternoon off from the studios

Who better than Miss Lumley to play a dish from outer space?

Her father was Major James Lumley of the 2/6 Gurkhas. Joanna was born in Kashmir on May 1, 1946, and raised on *Kim*. In 1947 she left India by troopship for a traditional middle-

class education in Kipling's Sussex. A prep school in Rolvenden was followed by St Mary's Anglican Convent near Hastings. "I was not head girl, but I was a prefect." A prefect no doubt of the Betjeman kind, "thrillingly stern and kind": but she

was caught smoking and, in a ceremony reminiscent of the Northwest frontier, her prefect's badge was removed publicly, a humiliation which took place once she had finished reading the lesson. All the girls who had been smoking were told to attend

upon the headmistress, who whispered "Judas" to Lumley (who was at the head of a long queue) as she swept past.

Between puffs she passed eight "O" levels, but only French out of three "A" levels. She failed German and Latin. "Latin is always useful for *The Times* crossword," she said. What did her parents want her to do? "I had four things I wanted to do," she said. "First to become prime minister; second a brain surgeon; third a pilot and an actress, fourth. But all I really wanted to do was to be filmed doing the first three." She smiled brilliantly. "I was lazy, had spots, and I thought boys disgusting until I was 18."

The first of her childhood ambitions encouraged me to ask what she thought of Margaret Thatcher. "I approve of her. She has clearly had to run up all the escalators." Miss Lumley votes Conservative. She lives in a pretty flat in a Victorian house in Holland Park, but wild horses could not compel her to send her 11-year-old son Jamie to the well-known local comprehensive. "Private education teaches duties rather than rights." Miss Lumley is not an officer's daughter for nothing – her son is down for Harrow.

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"Purdey" Lumley with Patrick Macnee in a scene from the series *The New Avengers*

replies: "Sex symbol? I am non-toxic, safe: a friend to all the world. Girls write to me asking for photographs to give their boyfriends." So much for all we have read in the gossip columns. Miss Lumley is unmarried; her marriage to Jeremy Lloyd lasted eight months. Yet for the uxorious there is still hope. "If people can make it work, marriage is the best thing in the world. I'm all in favour of it," she says.

She left Hastings to become a model and, having passed through the hands of Miss Lucie Clayton, soon appeared in all the glossy magazines. She had small parts in films, commercials and television but her big chance came with the part of Purdey. She was not asked to the original audition but she hammered on the producer's door and was admitted at last. The selection process was exhausting: four weeks of reading, acting and film tests. She beat Diana Quick in the final.

She spent three weeks learning judo with "Sid" Charles, a girl, who is, I am told, the heavyweight champion of Europe.

Miss Lumley played Purdey with the requisite light touch, all fun and frolic, mocking with her brilliant smile a series of programmes described by one jaundiced television critic as being "as camp as a row of tents". "Yes, I am a comedienne, but in England funny women are expected to be ugly. It is

not so in America. Look at Goldie Hawn."

How seriously should we take her? Of her beauty there can be no doubt. If a micro-Helen is the measure of the ability of one woman to launch one ship, Miss Lumley could have brought the British Expeditionary Force back from Dunkirk. She is a celebrity, appearing on such programmes as *Call My Bluff*, and can be seen in bed on the hoardings, peering coyly over the top of her *Daily Mail*; but is she, as James Agate might have asked, a *femme serieuse*? What does she want to do next? Does she want to be a film star, or concentrate on the stage?

The answer is "both". She has already had small parts in eight films and appeared on the stage with Brian Rix and Alfred Marks. "I would love to be a film star. But nobody makes films any more and if they did I wouldn't go to Hollywood." As a pro. what she really wants is the esteem of her peers. And that, in England, means the stage.

She is torn between one of Shakespeare's ladies - Portia, Kate or Rosalind - and a good part in a modern play by Stoppard, Pinter, or, best of all, Alan Ayckbourn. Miss Lumley must, many feel, be pointed in the right direction; she is as beautiful as the late Kay Kendall and could be just as funny. (1)