



‘I’VE RATHER GOT A CRUSH ON MONTY DON’

Ahead of the Platinum Jubilee, the legendary Dame Joanna Lumley – author of a new book about the Queen – on encounters with Her Majesty and a passion for gardening royalty

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN SWANNELL

Dame Joanna Lumley is describing the time she was behind the wheel of a Jeep, driving the Queen. They were both in camouflage gear. “She trusted me,” purrs Joanna. “I had obviously been driving her for years.” Obviously. Isn’t it a bit unusual to dream about Her Majesty? “Masses of people do it. Thousands, millions of people dream about the Queen.”

Joanna, now acting royalty, has more reasons than most. Early in her career, she attended openings and film premieres and was in the line-ups of actors and actresses introduced to the royal family. Having befriended them, she attended the Queen’s arts parties for her jubilees in 2002 and 2012.

Once, she went to a private luncheon at Buckingham Palace, which she found “terribly thrilling, but terribly frightening”. She spent months choosing an outfit – only to wear “clothes”. No amount of acting – she’d starred as Purdey in *The New Avengers* by then – helped calm her on the day. “You get terribly unnerved,” Joanna says. “You just start talking absolute rot.”

Joanna sets the scene. She is no longer at the wooden table of her country-style kitchen, but at a pre-lunch tippie with Her Majesty and a handful of guests in the palace drawing room. Everyone is being “kind” (the loftiest virtue in the Lumley handbook). And then the Queen asks her what she is up to. Joanna, who had been chatting to a judge and a policewoman, can think of only one thing. She tells Her Majesty we should legalise drugs. Her host, she says, listened politely. Last year,

Joanna compiled a book about the Queen to celebrate the forthcoming Platinum Jubilee. *A Queen for All Seasons* comprises memories of royal encounters from an eclectic cast, including Tony Blair after he assumed power in 1997, the American evangelist Billy Graham and members of the public.

“I wanted it to be like a bunch of flowers for the Queen,” says Joanna with typical effusiveness, “from something as humble as a little buttercup to something as grand as a gladioli... I wanted to put together a picture of a terrifically familiar and yet completely unknown character.”

A ROYAL LOVE AFFAIR

Joanna thinks “the world” of the Queen and still has a wooden box, adorned with Her Majesty’s stencil, made for the coronation in 1953 when she was seven. Joanna and her family lived in Malaya (now Malaysia). The coronation, which she watched three times, was enchanting. “It was so remote and thrilling,” she says. “And the music and the pomp and the ceremony... There was something about the slowness of the walk up the aisle and that great train, and the ladies-in-waiting and the nobility in their coronets, and *Vivat Regina!* The Queen seemed to me just splendid and very beautiful, with her lovely slim waist and good ankles and pretty dress.” Years later, Joanna would become enamoured with the Queen’s character, as someone who is “so unbelievably steadfast and loyal and hardworking, and determined and constant”.

Her book offers glimpses of a queen we rarely see. In one recollection, Her Majesty spots a child longing to give her flowers ▶

“I REUSE STRING, I REUSE WRAPPING PAPER... I HAVE CLOTHES IN MY WARDROBE THAT ARE 30 YEARS OLD”

on a royal visit and beckons her over, past security. Another highlights the Queen’s insistence on keeping her “parachute jump” during the London 2012 Opening Ceremony secret, causing confusion among the royal dressmakers tasked with making a dress identical to hers for a man (her stunt double). “It was lovely to realise that she is kind and funny,” says Joanna, who sent a copy of the book to the palace. Has the Queen read it? “The book has been placed before Her Majesty,” she says with glee.

ALL CREATURES, GREAT AND SMALL

What really struck Joanna was the Queen’s “sixth sense” around animals. “I wish she could have had more time with horses and dogs in the countryside,” she says. “It’s obviously her greatest love.” Joanna, who was pony-mad as a girl, would like to see this side of her up close. “I’d love to be with her at her stables.”

She takes this as a cue to talk about her own passion for the outdoors. “I’m a great animal-lover, a great nature-lover, always have been,” she cries. It’s a love she inherited, she says, from her parents, particularly during her early childhood in Hong Kong and Malaya, before the family moved to England when she was eight.

Joanna’s father, James, was born in Lahore, now Pakistan, and served with the 6th Gurkha Rifles, while her mother, Thyra, spent part of her childhood in the Himalayas. Joanna remembers the affection her mother had for all creatures of all kinds: “She always made us hold things and save things, so that, even now, I’ll be arranging some flowers, find an ant and I’ll still be getting that ant onto a sheet of paper 20 minutes later to take it outside.”

The natural world is “paradise”, while Sir David Attenborough is “like an apostle”, showing us how it all works. And yet, she says, her voice at a whisper, “mankind is wrecking it. So much of my grown-up efforts have been trying to get people to treat the earth and its creatures with more respect and affection and care.”

Joanna is patron of a host of environmental charities, from Compassion in World Farming to the Earth Restoration Service and Farms for City Children. She has campaigned for the end of single-use plastics and has recently proposed “rationing”, where we are all given points to spend on carbon-hungry holidays or products. Last year, she joined Sacha Dench, the “human swan” (interviewed in our November 2021 issue), in a paramotor to call attention to climate change for a TV documentary.

Joanna has also been a vegetarian “for ever and ever and ever” (40 years). This, she adds, is the secret to eternal youth. “People say, ‘You’re 75, you’re an old crone, how do you stay so young and vigorous?’ And I always say, veg-et-ar-ian-ism. Don’t eat meat or fish. Just say no.” She is smoking by this point, but, of course, she could quit – at once. “I’ve got an iron discipline!” Such discipline, which she puts down to her modelling days when

she had to do all her own styling, pervades every aspect of her life. Even her approach to rubbish. I must, she insists, get the grand tour. “Here we are,” she says, pointing to a cardboard box. “This is recycling... And this is for things you can’t put in there, like Cellophane... And this is the sink.” More bins, one for compost, follow.

What escapes one of Joanna’s many bins gets a chance at another life. “I save all the rubber bands with the post and take them back to the post office. I take all my coat hangers back to the dry cleaners. I reuse string, I reuse wrapping paper, I reuse

clingfilm, tinfoil. I have clothes in my wardrobe that are 30 years old, which I wear regularly. I reuse, reuse, reuse.”

COUNTRY ESCAPE

This year, Joanna was made a Dame in the Queen’s New Year Honours List for services to drama, entertainment and charity. “I was so stunned and so thrilled, so humbled,” she says. “Even now, I don’t think of myself as a Dame. I get letters on them with ‘Dame’ and I think, ‘Really?’” Her new status aligns her with actresses such as Dame Maggie Smith and Dame Judi Dench or, as she calls them, “these sorts of giants”. Her face glows with delight. “I think you join the junior ranks first,” she says. “I’m a Dame-ette!”

Dame-ette Joanna and her husband Stephen Barlow, a composer and conductor, split their time between London and their cottage in Dumfriesshire. “You can’t see any other properties around, just hills and valleys,” she says, with a contented sigh. “We love the peace and quiet.” In Scotland, Joanna likes to go on walks, take photographs and slink around in old clothes.

Snatched moments of downtime in London are best spent in the garden, a thin jungle of a plot with a path at its spine. “I’m always stuffing things in,” Joanna says, “chrysanthemums, poppies and dahlias.” There are also trees of every kind, producing walnuts, figs, olives, lemons, plums, pears and apples. The latest is a Cox’s Orange Pippin, planted as part of The Queen’s Green Canopy for the Jubilee. “I quite like the feeling of a bit of a wilderness,” she says.

Joanna would also quite like to impress her gardening hero. “I’ve rather got a crush on Monty Don,” she says, followed by that deep laugh. “One year at Chelsea [the RHS Flower Show], he asked me what my garden was like. I told him I like to leave it quite wild and he said, ‘You mean completely untended?’ It hurt so much! No, Monty, not untended. Wild.”

Any “wild” gardening this summer will be squeezed in between Jubilee celebrations. Joanna’s attendance at the royal engagements are under wraps, but invitations to many a street party must be in the post. And if the Queen needs a driver, she knows where to come. Dame Joanna is waiting. Camouflage gear not required.

JOANNA’S *A Queen for All Seasons* is out now (Hodder & Stoughton, £20).



OUR ROYAL SNAPPER

Our photographer, John Swannell, reveals his links to the Queen

In 2012, the Queen chose John Swannell as her Diamond Jubilee photographer. “I found a painting of her father and photographed her in the mirror, with the picture in shot. I thought she’d be so pleased with that.” Yet the official photo, also by John, shows the Queen alone. “I was really disappointed.” Months later, John spoke to a woman looking after the Queen’s press. “She said the Queen had [my other photo] in her bedroom. She loved that one.” The Queen is a “dead patient” sitter, says John, but thinks she picks him for speed. “If you drag it out, the sitter’s eyes glaze over. I am really quite quick.”

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD DUNWOODY/
COMPASSION IN WORLD FARMING



A life in STAGES

1946 Born in India to an army major dad and a nature-loving mother (above with Joanna and her elder sister)

1960s Becomes a model after a spell at Lucie Clayton Charm Academy

1967 Son Jamie is born after a relationship with Michael Claydon

1969 Gets her first acting role

1976-77 Makes her name as Purdey in TV series *The New Avengers*

1986 Marries conductor and composer Stephen Barlow

1992-96 Creates Patsy Stone in comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*

1995 Made an OBE

2008 Becomes the face of the Gurkha Justice Campaign to give all Nepalese Gurkhas the right to settle in Britain

2011 Nominated for a Tony for her role in *La Bête* on Broadway

2013 Stars alongside Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Wolf of Wall Street*

2021 Publishes her book *A Queen for All Seasons*

2021-present Stars in *Finding Alice*, a black comedy on ITV

2022 Made a Dame Commander Order of the British Empire. Now filming a documentary for ITV following the spice route. Champions environmental causes (left). Celebrates the Jubilee