

Cometh the hour, cometh the woman



No longer just the 'next big thing', Romola Garai is now every inch the fully-fledged star. Not that it's gone to her head. She talks to KATE SALTER about powerful women, why she shuns Hollywood and her new role in what's being called the British 'Mad Men' PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDA BROWNLEE

There is something in the way that Romola Garai is eating a cheese sandwich that suggests this is not your typical A-list actress. The sandwich is a resolutely unstarry one – ordinary sliced bread with a cheddar filling – but Garai is demolishing it with a kind of gusto that is rarely witnessed in interviews. Many actresses would not dare eat during an interview, too worried about the blob of mayonnaise on their chin appearing in print, but Garai has no such qualms. In between the enthusiastic bites of sandwich – and now handfuls of crisps – she is talking passionately on subjects ranging from gender politics and the Middle East, to feminism and 19th-century English literature.

Garai, 28, may be one of Britain's most talented actresses, heart-stoppingly beautiful and doing the best work of her career, but she is not one to stand on ceremony – hence the sandwich. She is unselfconscious, forthright and clever. And after years of being touted as 'the next big thing' she is now, well, huge. She has only just left our screens as Sugar, the lead role in the BBC drama *The Crimson Petal and the White*, and she's back again, leading another BBC2 blockbuster drama, *The Hour*, which starts next month.

The Hour, written by the Bafta award-winner Abi Morgan, is set in a BBC television studio in 1956, the time of the Suez Crisis, and captures the dawning of a new era of television news. Garai plays Bel Rowley, a producer battling to carve out a groundbreaking news programme, whom Abi Morgan describes as having 'the beauty of Lauren Bacall, the wit of Katharine Hepburn, and the spirit of Rosalind Russell'. Dominic West plays the show's vain presenter, and Ben Whishaw its investigative reporter (and West's rival for Bel's affections). It is a brilliant mix of espionage thriller, politics, lush period drama and soap opera.

'Bel is *such* a great character,' Garai says, taking another bite of sandwich. 'She was a huge draw to me. It is quite hard to find those kinds of parts for women. Abi's a great writer and it's an *amazing* period of history. The Suez Crisis, especially in terms of the parallels with what's happening in the Middle East at the moment, well, I found it absolutely gripping – it's the Cold War but not the Cold War as we know it.'

Because it is set in the 1950s and has such forensic attention to detail (the telex machine in the newsroom actually works), *The Hour* has

already been compared with *Mad Men*, the American television series that single-handedly sparked a mania for all things mid-century. In fact, it feels more reminiscent of film noir. Although she is a fan of *Mad Men*, Garai is not sure our current love affair with the 1950s is entirely positive.

'I find a lot of the 1950s nostalgia, especially in terms of women, very dubious,' she says. 'This is a very morally conservative time, not a great time for women. Particularly when people say it was a time of optimism. Well, Britain was post-war, rationing only ended two years before our show is set – it was a bomb site. Britain was still desperately trying to cling on to its empire. It was a dark time, I think. So I hope that *The Hour* explores that kind of ambiguity because I think it's easily overlooked.'

Garai does of course look fantastic in the fitted twinsets, trench coats and pencil skirts, but one of the things that *The Hour* does so well is show what it was like to be a woman with a career at that time. Bel is pretty, young and very eligible, but she knows that to take her eye off the ball for even a second will be at the cost of her job. 'What I found fascinating was that it was a time when women were entering the workplace, but not married women,' Garai says. 'So your career was a choice and those women chose their career over partnership, companionship, children. It was a massive amount of sacrifice.' Abi Morgan has said that one of the inspirations for the character of Bel Rowley was Grace Wyndham Goldie, the BBC producer who was responsible for transforming the BBC's news coverage (but who did manage to get married as well as have a career). During the early 1950s, when Wyndham Goldie was launching

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Romola Garai in the BBC drama *The Hour*, with her co-star Dominic West

her current affairs manifesto, there were only four other women in the BBC in positions more senior than secretary. The newsroom in *The Hour* is similarly macho, with women like Bel having to 'work 10 times harder than anyone else', as Dominic West's character puts it.

It's easy to see why Garai enjoyed playing Bel. Would she say she's a feminist? 'Oh yes,' she says, nodding and taking a slurp of tea. 'I'm always quite disappointed by the extent to which really bright, well-educated actresses don't seem to be engaging enough with those issues. I get quite disappointed that we're still telling stories that I think are problematic in terms of what they're saying about women.' Playing a Victorian prostitute then, as she did in *The Crimson Petal*, must have been a challenge for her. 'I would always talk a lot to Marc [the director] about what was being said and who has control of the story, and whether it was titillating or not, or whether it was truthful. Those things *matter* to me a lot' – her wide blue eyes widen even more to make her point.

Garai can seem rather earnest at times (Dominic West joked that 'Romsey Poms', as he calls her, clearly just to irritate her, can be 'quite fierce') but she is also great company – she laughs out loud at herself and swears like a squaddie. But she admits that she has to think carefully about her parts, because 'I have always been interested in gender politics so I'm not that keen on doing things that don't represent a truth about women'.

Garai has managed to find 'truth about women' in a variety of roles. Although, until now, probably best known for her costume-drama heroines, even

when in full crinolines and a bonnet she has tried to explore the more complicated side of women. She won rave reviews for her portrayal of Gwendolen Harleth, the misguided heroine in the BBC's adaptation of *Daniel Deronda* (2002) and she found depths of insecurity in Jane Austen's *Emma* (2009) that others might not. One of her favourite roles, she says, was as Angel Deverell, a vain and ambitious Edwardian novelist, whom she played in *Angel* (2007) directed by François Ozon. 'It was her unpleasantness that appealed to me,' Garai said at the time.

'I'm always trying to make the character less sympathetic,' she says. 'When I think about



the women I know, there's so much more moral ambiguity and I think quite often in a lot of writing, particularly writing by men, they're unwilling to see a lot of that moral ambiguity.'

Garai began her acting career in earnest when she was in her first year of university. A casting director, who had seen her in a school production, asked her to audition for the part of the young Judi Dench in *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells* (2000). 'The next thing I knew I had an agent and I suddenly started getting work.' She was studying English literature at the University of London when she read the script for *I Capture the Castle* (2003), the adaptation of Dodie Smith's novel, in which Garai first properly caught people's attention. She decided she had to choose between finishing her degree and acting, and she chose acting. Since then there has been a seemingly endless stream of work. She has starred in the brilliantly funny *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004), *Vanity Fair* (2004) and *Atonement* (2007), alongside Keira Knightley and James McAvoy (some reviewers thought Garai's was the best performance). In all of her films the thing that strikes you most about her is how natural she seems. Julian Fellowes, who co-wrote the script for *Vanity Fair*, said that in her acting 'there is a kind of rare simplicity'.

But while she is happy to talk endlessly about her acting roles, Garai has always remained tight-lipped about her off-duty life. She had a 'bog-standard middle-class upbringing', a happy childhood, but she won't be drawn any further. She is the third of four children – her elder brother and sister and younger sister all have names that begin with the letter R (the surname Garai was from her Hungarian-Jewish great-grandfather; the name Romola is the female of Romolo, from Romulus). She was born in Hong Kong, where her father was a bank manager; her mother was a journalist until the children were born.

When Garai was eight her family moved to Wiltshire, where she went to a private girls' school. At 16 she managed to persuade her parents to let her go to sixth-form college in London and live with her elder sister.

She has never said much about boyfriends, only that she has been out with a few older men, but that was a long time ago and she has since resolved to keep silent on the subject.

What she will talk about is her love of all things cultural. She is a voracious reader and an avid theatre-goer. 'I guess I feel like that's the point of being alive,' she says, then laughs at how pretentious that might sound. 'It sounds really w—, but I love all of that.'

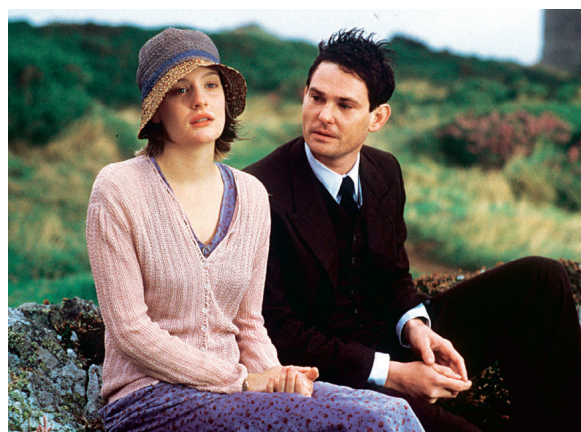


'You have to be really hardworking to break America ...and I'm lazy'

As well as film, Garai has tackled her fair share of meaty theatre roles. The first theatre work she ever did was in *Calico*, a complicated play about James Joyce's relationship with his mentally ill daughter. She has also appeared in *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull*, *King Lear* and now she is about to star in *The Village Bike* at the Royal Court. 'My main ambitions, really, are in the theatre,' she says.

It is often the case with successful young British actresses that the next step seems to be 'breaking America', but Garai is not one to be seduced by the lure of Hollywood. In fact, the only blip on her otherwise exemplary CV was when she did make a stab at it, and starred in *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* in 2004, which went straight to video. Although she has said it was fun, she also said she faced 'huge pressure' to lose weight, which, with someone of Garai's feminist principles, must have gone down a treat. Would she ever be tempted back? She politely wipes her nose on her sleeve (and apologises, saying she has a cold) and thinks.

'There are American directors I'd really like to work with, but I don't know how much I want to be sitting in my house, doing the rounds of meetings with CEOs. You have to be really hardworking to do all that and I'm lazy.' It's a very honest answer, and also a particularly British one. 'You have to have your eye on the prize,' she continues. 'And there's nothing wrong with that, but when I go to work I don't really want to have to come home and go to the gym for two hours. I have a nice life. It would be hard to give it up.' ●



From top: Garai in 'Atonement' (2007); with Henry Thomas in 'I Capture the Castle' (2003); with Jonathan Rhys Meyers in 'Vanity Fair' (2004)

The Hour is on BBC2 next month