

# Hit and *misfit*

She's one of the finest actresses of her generation, confounding those who said she'd never make it. The question is, will Maxine Peake ever believe it herself? She talks to KATE SALTER

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN BURN-FORTI

Maxine Peake says that what first attracted her to the role of Martha Costello, a criminal defence barrister in BBC One's new drama series *Silk*, wasn't her unfailing sense of justice, or her immovable moral compass. It was, she says, the description of her 'smoking a fag and stuffing a wig and gown into a plastic bag. I thought, "I have to play this woman."'

For many actresses the prospect of leading a new prime-time BBC series would be reason enough to go for the part, but Peake has always been drawn to the fag-and-plastic-bag elements of a character and has made a stellar career out of playing misfits, emotional wrecks and hard-bitten survivors.

At 36, Peake is certainly not a 'bright young thing', but in the past few years she has starred in some of television's best dramas and is being fêted as one of the finest actresses of her generation. She is probably best known for playing Veronica Fisher, the peroxide-blonde, sex-mad neighbour in *Shameless*, but she has appeared in the gritty dramas *Red Riding*, *The Street*, *Criminal Justice* and *Messiah*, as well as in the costume dramas *Little Dorrit* and *The Devil's Whore*. She played John Prescott's lover and secretary, Tracey Temple, in *Confessions of a Diary Secretary* (2007) and Myra Hindley in *See No Evil: The Moors Murders* (2006). She was nominated for a Bafta for her part as Joan Le Mesurier, Tony Hancock's lover, in the BBC Four

Hair and make-up: Nina Pach at Carol Hayes, using Chanel and Moroccan Oil for Hair





film *Hancock & Joan* (2008), and is a respected stage actress. Yet, despite this huge body of work, she has somehow managed to remain relatively anonymous.

With her lead role in *Silk* that might be about to change. The series is written by Peter Moffat, a former barrister and the award-winning writer of *Criminal Justice*, and the cast includes Rupert Penry-Jones as Peake's character's colleague-cum-rival. As well as providing an intriguing insight into the life of a criminal defence barrister – in the second episode Costello must defend an accused rapist – it offers the kind of fast-paced addictive viewing that should prove a hit. For Peake the character of Costello and the series itself is something of a departure in that she is defending the murderers rather than playing them.

'My agent's been saying for a while that I needed to do something more mainstream,' Peake says when we meet. 'You do all these things and people still come up to me and go, "Were you in *Shameless*?" And when I say yes they say, "Are you still acting?"' Then she starts giggling.

Peake, who was born and grew up in Bolton, has a strong Lancashire accent and the kind of mercilessly self-deprecating humour that makes any story she tells, however mundane or tragic, sound hilarious. She told one interviewer, 'As my mum said to me before she passed, "Maxine, one thing you'll promise me, you'll stop dressing like a lesbian."'

Today she is looking decidedly un-'lesbian' in a vintage-inspired ensemble of wide-legged jeans, and a navy-blue sailor top over a bright red polo-neck. Her hair is pulled back off her face and her lips are stained red. On screen Peake's features often seem delicate, and slightly strained, but in person her blonde hair, heart-shaped face and wide blue eyes have a striking 1950s pin-up quality.

Peake says that she found the prospect of leading such a high-profile drama intimidating. 'I was frightened of doing something BBC prime time. I was thinking, "Is it me?" And I did feel a responsibility. I know I'll get into trouble for being so self-deprecating, but you do worry and think, "If the audience don't warm to me, or if they don't think I'm very good, then the whole series..." and she raises her eyebrows as if to say, 'What then?'

Peake has said before that she doesn't think there are enough mainstream dramas with really strong female leads – women who aren't just

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Clockwise from above: in *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*; as Martha Costello in the new BBC drama series *Silk*; as Myra Hindley in *See No Evil*

'having affairs and buying expensive shoes', as she has put it. While there is a hint of a will-they-won't-they storyline to *Silk*, the plot focuses first and foremost on Costello's all-consuming passion for her job. 'I really hope that comes across,' says Peake. 'You do worry. It's this thing again: female, in her thirties, single... But what I wanted to get across was that she's not *unhappy*. What's great about it is she isn't looking for a partner, she isn't desperate to meet somebody. She loves what she does and she's passionate about it.' Peake was also

keen that Costello had decidedly unfussy eating habits and told Peter Moffat that, when her character is shown eating, 'can she *please* be eating a sandwich and not be toying with a salad'.

To research her part in *Silk* Peake spent a lot of time at Manchester Crown Court sitting in on cases and admits that she found it compelling. 'You get a bit addicted,' she says. 'It's much better than daytime telly. Even in the little cases, like petty theft, there are so many stories and relationships going on.'

She also glimpsed the hidden world of the serial public gallery attendee, people who attend cases out of morbid curiosity and treat the spectacle like

a trip to the cinema. 'The first time I went, there was a couple in their sixties in the public gallery,' Peake says, smiling. 'The woman turned round and offered me a sweet. Then she said in a stage whisper, "We come here all the time. We're only doing the first half of this. There's a fraud over there and they look like butter wouldn't melt."'

By her own admission, Peake's journey to mainstream television has not been without its setbacks. She says she was rejected so often as a young actress starting out that only sheer bloody-mindedness forced her to continue. Some of her earliest memories are of singing Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* on top of the black pouf in her sitting-room; but, partly because she comes from a working-class background, she says she had little idea of how one went about becoming an actress.

After school she enrolled in a performing arts course at Salford College of Technology, and spent

two unhappy years 'playing comedy old people'. 'When I look back now I don't quite know why I kept going. I really don't. I was big, with a basin haircut, dressed like a boy, and I think people just thought, "What are we going to do wi' yer?"' Despite the staff encouraging her to leave (she was told she should try comedy writing instead of acting), Peake finished the course. 'My mum used to say to me, "God, you must be thick-skinned," because of how many knock-backs I got.'

Then Peake and a friend heard that Rada was auditioning at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester and thought, 'B— this, let's audition.' She was asked to travel to London for a recall and won a place.

Did she feel intimidated, being that far away from home and among serious actor types? 'Actually, I think I was quite disappointed when I got there because there were about five Northerners in my year. I thought it was going to be the son of Lord and Lady Such-a-body and I'd be going to the Highlands to someone's castle for my Christmas holidays!'

At Rada she encountered more discouragement from staff who doubted that she was acting material. She was a great deal heavier then, and one teacher told her if she didn't lose weight she'd 'never play Juliet'. And then there was her strong accent, something she says she had never even considered, until teachers kept commenting on it. 'But I sort of knew that actually my accent was my selling point to get started. I thought, "If I lose my accent there'll be nothing about me to make me different from anybody else."' If anything, she says, Rada did wonders for her sense of self-reliance, and instilled in her a feeling of 'if you don't think I can do this, I'll show you... I suppose I'm still doing a bit of that now.'

Her first regular television role was that of the monosyllabic Twinkle in Victoria Wood's *Dinnerladies* in 1998, a part she played so deadpan people wondered if she was acting at all. It was Wood who suggested that Peake, as a big, blonde Northerner, should consider losing some weight or risk being forever typecast.

If there is one similarity in the parts that Peake has played, it is that they have been immensely strong yet vulnerable women, though Peake isn't sure she agrees. 'It's interesting when people say, "You always play strong women," because as far as I'm concerned women *are* strong. I think that's what women are. We have got that vulnerability but we have got that strength. We are survivors.'

Always up for a challenge, Peake says she likes to take parts that feel almost impossible. She says she is never attracted to anything that feels too

familiar. 'If it looks hard and I think, "Where on earth am I going to start with this?" then I can't help saying yes.' A good example of this was the role of Myra Hindley in *See No Evil*. Her performance was so measured it was utterly believable, but she admits that 'it was difficult to shake off if I'm honest about it now'.

It is this fearlessness that has gained Peake a fan-base, but it means that she is picky about the roles she takes, and she worries that, as she gets older, quality parts will be scarcer. 'I do worry, as I'm getting closer to my forties, as a woman. Time's ticking on, you know.' Peake hardly needs to worry about that yet, but she says one of the reasons she moved back up North, after 13 years of living in London, was to take a step back and start thinking of ways to expand her career. She says that, if parts do dry up, she could always write them herself.

The main reason Peake now lives in Salford, however, is to be close to her family. Her father,

a retired lorry driver, lives nearby, as do her sister, a policewoman, and her grandfather, who partly brought her up after her parents divorced when she was young. There is no mention of a partner, but Peake has said before that she is so independent she finds it hard to settle down. There are not many actresses, who, at the height of their career, decide to leave London, but Peake says she's never been happier, riding around Salford on her old Pashley bicycle as the locals shout, 'Oi, Miss Marple!' at her.

But no matter how

successful Maxine Peake might become in the future, it seems she will always be able to rely on her nerves to keep her grounded. While filming a new drama recently, Peake says she drove her fellow actors mad with her constant crises of confidence. 'Every job still feels like the first time,' she says apologetically. 'I wish I could come on with a bit of gravitas. But I just bumble on, then go and sit in my Winnebago, going, "Oh my God, I'm terrible, I'll never work again, the director hates me..."' She shrugs. 'Well, maybe that's just my process. No pain no gain.' ●

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At the Bafta Awards in 2009

*Silk* is on BBC1 in February