

THIS IS THE happiest 'I'VE EVER BEEN

Helen McCrory talks to Victoria Young about feminism, marriage to a sex symbol – and being a gypsy at heart



Actress Helen McCrory, 46, has played everyone from Medea to Cherie Blair as well as Polly Gray in *Peaky Blinders*. She's married to actor Damian Lewis. They live in London and have two children, Manon, eight, and Gulliver, seven.

I grew up in Africa because my father was a diplomat. So I was lucky enough to grow up in a world without advertising. As a result, I've never judged myself on what I was supposed to look like. It's good and bad. When it came to filming the second series of *Peaky Blinders*, I decided "I want Polly to look rougher, she should look haggard, life beaten, absolutely exhausted." I then saw the first episode and remembered the adage, "Be careful what you wish for."

The red carpet is the most fantastic antidote to parts like that. I love getting dressed up. And having a professional make-up and hair person does make a huge difference. Wearing a beautiful dress often makes you look better because you hold yourself and move in a different way, and that's what makes you feel, "This is best I can look." It's not all shoulders back, tummy in, but it helps.

Last year I decided I was going back to work full-time. So instead of saying, "I love the main part, but can I play her best friend, because I don't actually want to spend five months in Prague", I said yes to lots of things. As a result, I've done three films (*Bill*, *A Little Chaos*, *The Woman in Black: Angel of Death*), two series (*Peaky Blinders* and *Penny Dreadful*) and *Medea* at the National.

I absolutely loved it. But even though I was never away for more than a few days at a time, I missed the children. It taught me a lot about balance. I realised that if I have the privilege of being freelance, I don't want to work as if I'm not. I like being home more.

I've been acting for 22 years. And as my experience and my position has changed on set, so has my openness to do nudity because I'm more in control. I'm able to sit down with the director and producer and say, "The love scene is important, so let's do that", knowing that I will equally be able to say, "I'd like to see playback on that please" or "How are you shooting it?" Consequently I have filmed more love scenes but the viewer sees little more than a back or

a thigh. But they still understand the story. If you want something more, there's a whole other industry out there to cater for you too!

Does being nude on set make me self-conscious? Yes, of course! Having said that, I don't go to the gym – because acting is so physical. Playing a Greek tragedy in a 1,300 seater theatre – well there's not much fat on you at the end of that run.

I'm very disciplined when it comes to food. That's because I really enjoy my job and want to continue doing it. I'm tuned into weight not so much because of the way it looks – it's more to do with wanting to feel strong and energetic, sustaining a part night after night on stage requires you to be both. But I eat a lot and I eat out a lot. If you tasted my home cooking you would understand why!

I don't diet but I don't eat that much junk. Growing up in Africa meant I didn't have sugar around me so I just don't have the taste for it. Yes, I'll eat cake and chips but I don't equate food and sugar with happiness. Brie and red wine, however, are another story.

Emotionally, I love getting older. I'm certainly happier, more comfortable in my own skin; I worry less about trivial things. I've worked hard to get here and it's great. It feels like an adventure because I've got little children and I still feel like I've just got married and still have no idea where it's all leading to! This is the happiest I've been, and so it should be. I'm also very aware that "this too will pass" so I try to enjoy and relish and cherish all the good moments.

Damian and I are best friends and we talk a lot – about everything. I just like him more than anybody else. And I have a lot of respect for him, which is very important in a relationship. The huge advantage that we have in our marriage is that we both enjoy our work a lot. When you have something that you take your own confidence from and you also have your own separate influences and friendships, it's very healthy for the relationship.

I also think that we allow our relationship to change and grow. Who we were when we met, and who we were when he was working and I was pregnant and breastfeeding and when he comes onto set and I'm working and

he's looking after the children; these are all different versions of ourselves and we allow for all of them.

That said, it's incredibly hard to be away from each other and then come back together without rippling the pond. You have to be able to be independent because you can't just fall to pieces whenever your partner's away and you're alone with the children or vice versa. But then you have to learn to become yielding, and together again. >>

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All of those things are very challenging. Our challenge is more about trying to find patterns and stabilities.

I don't feel jealous that Damian attracts so much female attention.

It's very flattering sometimes when women get all giggly around my husband. Of course I would be jealous if he gave it a lot of attention, but he doesn't, so I've no need to.

Being in the public eye is part of our reality now. But it's not in either of our natures to have our heads turned by it. The best way to keep an even keel internally is not to become too involved – with both the good and bad stuff. Because equally when people aren't as charming as they could be, you've got to make sure it doesn't rile you and spoil your day.

We've work very hard to try and find a balance with our work and our family. But it's a constant conversation. When we get a job offer it's not just, "So you like the script? It's about, "What's happening; how would that work?"

Is that going to make any of us happy?" It's a big, constant jigsaw.

My parents have been extraordinary and both my children are very close to them.

We go and see them in Wales and they come down to stay with us. Damian's mother's passed away but the children adore Damian's father too, he'll take them out for treats or for a tea and they'll sit and chat and watch the frogs in his garden pond together.

It's trickier now the kids are in school because we have to start thinking about their stability and education. Luckily their schools are

incredibly supportive of us taking the children out and see travelling as part of their education. We haven't done it yet

as they're at a very important age and we are aware of the importance of stability.

Having children has really taught me about focus and slowing things down.

I feel like I can elasticate time: I can go from a thousand to 40 in one screeching stop as I step over the threshold into the house again, knowing that actually the children don't want me to hurtle down into the kitchen, shouting, "We've got 15 minutes before we need to go out again and I need to do this and phone this person." Instead I just sit and take the time with them to have fun and play. And then run around like a headless chicken afterwards.

If they said they wanted to be actors that's fine.

My main wish is just that they know what they want to do, which is a gift. I was very lucky, I remember leaving school and passionately wanting to be an actress. There are no actors in my family but both my parents are Celts, and boy can they tell a story, a joke or sing a song – show off basically. So it wasn't a huge leap for me to get paid for it.

My big hope for my children is that they continue to have a childhood. I'm really aware of the sexualisation of >>

HELEN CLOSE UP

What would you tell your younger self? Use neck cream.

What's your tippie? Dirty, dirty vodka martinis.

Are you a spender or a saver? A bury-your-head-in-the-sander? I'm just not that interested in buying things and I'm frightened of living beyond my means.

Technology: friend or foe? Friend! The internet is amazing. But I'm not into Twitter or Facebook yet – it's hard enough for any of us to have

privacy anymore without giving the last remnants of it away, voluntarily.

What have you inherited from your mother? Footballer's legs, being quick to smile, and mad, curly hair that reduces any hairdresser to a blubbing wreck.

What do you most like about yourself? My brain.

Cosmetic surgery: yes or no? If it makes someone feel better, then who else cares? Personally I don't think it goes far enough. I'm waiting for the full

body and face lift – when they invent it I'm in and I'll sue if my navel isn't just below my chin by the time they finish with me.

What is your idea of absolute indulgence? A late, late breakfast with papers in the sun by a pool with my husband (below) and no mobile reception.



little girls now and I'm careful to strike a balance. My daughter loves dressing up. She loves making and customising clothes. But she's never been shopping with me for her clothes: she's eight, so as far as I'm concerned she's still at that stage where her mum buys her clothes and she wears them. Even if she has sewn tassels and pom-poms to most of them.

I do talk to Manon and Gulliver about the world outside their experience but in children's terms. I don't want to scare

them because they're only little, but I do talk about the fact that in some countries, girls aren't allowed to drive cars or to go out without their brothers or their fathers, about differences or about poverty because I want them eventually to understand our privilege.

Girlfriends are important to me but Damian is my best friend. We went to Los Angeles when I'd just had the children so it meant a break in those relationships. Those years that naturally women tend to hang out together when children are little because you're home more – maybe for the first time in my case because I'd always been working – that didn't happen. So friends are important, but because of my job, I don't see them as much as I want to. In fact, if they're reading this, call – I'm around till July!

The best way to describe my house décor is the "unfinished look". It's not so much shabby chic as just shabby. I love my home and I like to feel comfortable in it, but I don't really see my home as a reflection of me. I am definitely a gypsy at heart.

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WHAT'S COMING UP FOR HELEN?

BILL I was thrilled when I was sent the script, it's anarchic and it's very funny. It's about William (Bill) Shakespeare coming to London to become a playwright and it's a batty, brilliant Elizabethan romp. I've got a bald wig on, rotten teeth and pockmarks; such fun to play.

A LITTLE CHAOS is directed by Alan Rickman, with Kate Winslet and Stanley Tucci and it's a beautiful story. "Little chaos" was the way that the French would describe English gardens. It's set in



the court of Versailles and it's about life really – do you see life like Louis did; that you control

everything around it? Or do you do as the English did, which is you have wild, rambling roses and allow love or memory to affect you? I play the controlling wife of a man called Le Notre. There is a love triangle and he falls in love with Kate.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK: ANGEL OF DEATH is my first foray into gothic horror. It's set in the blitz; two women take 12 children out of London into the countryside, but guess what? It ain't safe there either. I was terrified throughout filming. There was no acting – I screamed like a child.

PENNY DREADFUL is the brainchild of John Logan, who did the script for *Skyfall* with Sam Mendes and it's brilliant. He has written about the streets of Victorian London, a man and a woman played by Eva Green and Timothy Dalton go to search for a missing daughter. They come across Frankenstein, vampires, Dorian Grey. My part started out as someone – but I am very much not who you thought I was. w&h

PHOTOGRAPHS: TREVOR LEIGHTON. HAIR BY MARC TRINDER. ART TEAM DIRECTOR AT CHARLES WORTHINGTON USING CHARLES WORTHINGTON SALON AT HOME. MAKE-UP: REBECCA BUTTERWORTH FOR MAC COSMETICS. STYLING: RACHEL FANCONI. FIRST SPREAD GOWN: BRUCE OLDFIELD. SANDALS: RENE CAOYILLA. EARRINGS AND BRACELET: DAVID MORRIS. SECOND PAGE DRESS: BRUCE OLDFIELD. BIKER JACKET: PRETTY BALLERINAS. SHOES: RENE CAOYILLA. ALL JEWELLERY: DAVID MORRIS. THIS PAGE GOWN: AMANDA WAKELEY. SHOES: GIANMARCO LORENZI. RING: DAVID MORRIS. CUFF: PEBBLE LONDON.