

my new shape

I'm healthier & happier with

Actress Ruth Jones talks to Victoria Young about the power of female friendship, losing four and a half stone – and the joy of singing into her hairbrush

Actress Ruth Jones, 45, rose to fame with *Gavin & Stacey*. She lives in Cardiff with her husband David, where they run Tidy Productions, and she has three stepchildren. Ruth has written and stars in a new ten-part comedy drama, *Stella*, which starts on Sky1 in January.

Health is really important to me. My uncle had a stroke and died last year, which was a bit of a wake-up call. At certain points in life it's easy not to think about what the consequences might be further down the road. But I made an effort to lose weight because I think the problems of obesity are becoming more known now.

I was 17 and a half stone. I stopped drinking five years ago, and I stopped smoking around three years ago, so the weight was the next thing.

I've always been big but I just felt that it was getting to a really unhealthy level. People have different attitudes if you're in the public eye. They can say, "Yeah, good for her, she embraces her size," and you think, "Yeah, but it's not healthy." Regardless of how it looks aesthetically, it's not healthy to have a BMI as high as I did. I wasn't able to move around.

I've lost four and a half stone. The key thing was acceptance and patience – to accept it was going to take a couple of

years. It's not going to happen overnight. I wouldn't judge anyone on how they lose weight, but the only way I was going to do it was to count calories. So I went down to 1,200-1,500 calories a day.

It was heartbreaking. There was literally a moment where I thought, "Oh my god, I've got to eat less food." It was more about the portion sizes than anything. I still have blowouts, but I got into the habit of counting calories. If I feel like it, I'll still eat chocolate, but I'll be thinking, "How many calories am I eating?" I've still got a way to go – I'm still two or three stone overweight, according to the charts. I'm in this half-stone zone that I don't move out of. I'm 13 stone >>



WHAT DOES 2012 HOLD?
The production company is very much at the forefront of things for David and me. The reason we set this company up is because we wanted to work together, and it's something you have to commit to. We've been meeting new writers, and we have a radio series for Radio Wales that's nothing to do with me. So the company is growing, which is what is exciting. David is developing other scripts by other writers, and it would be great if there was more *Stella*.

and I'll go up to 13.7 and back down again. It's hard to go past it. My husband lost weight with me – again, for health reasons.

I go through phases of exercising. I do aerobics and I did start to run but I realised that when you diet, you give yourself a really hard time if you fall off it. But it has to be a lifestyle change, so walking a bit faster is better than not walking at all.

I used to hate going clothes shopping. I used to say if I could be a size 16, I'd be happy. I'm a size 16 now and it has opened up a whole new world because there are so many more shops that do bigger sizes now. I don't wear as much baggy stuff – I don't hide as much.

The best compliment I've received? Recently, the woman in the Stella McCartney section of Selfridges shook her head at me when I said I was a size 16 and said, "No, dear, you're a 14 if ever I saw one!" She was wrong, but it felt SO good!

Dawn French is a heroine of mine. She was on my chat show at Easter and she's fantastic. It was a little bit overwhelming but I'd interviewed her on the radio and I'd read all her books. I think she's so talented in so many ways. She was someone I watched growing up, from when she was in *The Young Ones*. She's incredibly clever.

Other heroes are Julie Walters, Alison Steadman, Lauren Bacall and Joanna Lumley. I love women who are proper actresses and not celebrities. I'm not knocking people being celebrities but I admire people who focus more on their work rather than what they look like.

I think there's immense pressure put on women in the public eye. That whole thing of being papped is frightening. I saw a photo of me early in the morning, on the way in to a radio interview. It was one of those "How not to dress" columns, which was so embarrassing. Does that mean every time I go out of the house I have to have full make-up on! Luckily, I don't need to, living in Cardiff, but what

sometimes happens is I get asked to have a photo taken, and if I don't have make-up on I do get a bit self-conscious – maybe I shouldn't care or be bothered.

Stella came about because Stuart Murphy, who commissioned Gavin & Stacey, had this idea of me playing a British-type Roseanne. It was going to be a sitcom. But this was the idea that I had. I like the idea of a woman who set out at the age of 16 with her life going in one direction, and was very

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determined about that. With that in mind, she was at technical college but then she got pregnant.

I'm fascinated by how people's lives can change direction as a result of one event. I wanted to create a world that she lived in that was very affirming, in terms of extended family. She's

been married but divorced and I wanted her to have a good relationship with her ex-husband, even though she finds him annoying. He's a good dad and stepdad for Stella's firstborn. I wanted to get that positive family context.

I drew on my own experience to the extent that I have a big family. We've just had a big family Sunday lunch and there were 22 of us there. I'm one of four kids, and my brothers and sisters have kids. Then I have my three stepchildren, and my brother has a stepdaughter.

I've always been a bit of a drama queen. I was always the dramatic one, so my family had to put up with that. There are no other actors in my family so I'm not sure where that came from! But they are not competitive at all. I do like to make people laugh – it's a massive boost to make people laugh.

I hosted our Sunday lunch but David cooked – we take it in turns to cook. We have an open-plan kitchen, dining room and living area that opens out to the garden. My sister's kids are intrigued because we have tortoisés – my two-year-old niece wasn't quite sure what to make of them!

Family is very important for me, and we all get on very well, but my family is different to Stella's family. I wanted to portray Welsh family life. I love melodramatic Welsh characters because there's a great wealth of comedy to find there, but also huge love and heart and warmth within that melodramatic context. There are no characters in *Stella* that make you think, "Ooh, they're a nasty piece of work" – I'm more interested in finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.

I thought about setting it in Bristol, but I'm Welsh and that's what I know. But instead of it being Cardiff based, we moved it up to the southwest valleys. I think the southwest valleys are beautiful, which you perhaps wouldn't expect with the history of coal mining.

One of the other things that is central to Stella is friendship. Stella has this friendship with Paula, and they've known each other since school, and they're very honest with each other. That's definitely something I've experienced in real life.



PHOTOGRAPHS: TREVOR LEIGHTON. HAIR & MAKE-UP: SARAH ASPLEY-HUGHES. STYLING: RACHEL FANCONI. OPPOSITE PAGE: TOP, VIVIENNE WESTWOOD. ANGLOMANIA. SKIRT, HOBBS. EARRINGS AND RING, DOWER & HALL. THIS PAGE: DRESS, APOSTROPHE. EARRINGS AND RING, THEO FENNEL.

I have friends I've known since school, and there's something about those friendships. You've gone on journeys together, and when you were 16, you would never have imagined, if you could fast-forward the tape, where you'd be all these years later, and what happened. The very happy times and the very sad times – it's important to be able to share that with people that know you very well.

My own friendships were the inspiration for the friendship between Stella and Paula. There's a bit in episode one where they go to the curry buffet and dance to Dexys Midnight Runners. That was the anthem for my friends and me in the 80s – we'd all get the hairbrushes out and sing along. I can't believe we actually took the hairbrushes out with us!

I still get asked if there'll be any more Gavin & Stacey. It's a risk to keep going with something so well loved, but maybe we could have made an even better fourth series. We've said we'll make a special – I don't know when. I kept reading in the paper: "New Christmas Special of *Gavin & Stacey*," and I'm, "Oh really?!" But change is really healthy – I think it's important to embrace life moving on.

My friends aren't remotely bothered about me being on the telly, and neither are my stepkids. I love that. I find it really refreshing. I don't think I ever have a conversation with them about what I've done in telly. It's not like it's banned or anything, but it's like anyone talking about work at home – it's just not that interesting.

We talk about what's going on in their lives, which is much more interesting. One of my stepdaughters works in TV, although the other side of the camera, so we have a little bit of an overlap where we do talk about work. My stepson Alex worked on *Stella* for a while – he was in the camera, electric and art departments. I was just really interested in what he had done that day. He'd say he'd put pictures up on the wall for a party scene and I was like, "gasp" – I was really proud of what he'd been doing.

I just love seeing my stepchildren go on their journey and grow into these vibrant young adults. In terms of my



NEED TO KNOW...

- Advice to your younger self?** Go for it, do it! What have you got to lose! But I didn't follow that till I was in my forties; you always think everyone else is better than you but then you have to think, "We're all the same!" We're all scared; some people are just better at hiding it.
- Your luxury?** My bed. It's a European king size but it's specially made.
- Pessimist of optimist?** Bit of both.
- Guilty pleasure?** Linda Meredith Amazon Cream.
- Saver or spender?** Spender!
- Do you over- or under-pack?** Over – always. At the end of the holiday, my husband will say, "Right, how many outfits have you worn!" He's an under-packer and a saver – that's why it works so well.
- Good or bad loser?** Good loser!
- Favourite time waster?** When I get held up and I'm bored, I have this great Scrabble app on my phone.
- Hobbies** None. But I play the piano.
- Style icon** Lauren Bacall.
- You in three words?** Gullible, hopeful and curious.

role as stepmother, it's difficult to put into words. Obviously they're older now, so they don't need any telling off! We have a good trusting relationship. I seek their advice about anything from asking Fiona if these shoes look right to where we should go on holiday – all those sorts of day-to-day things.

David and I worked together, very hard, on Stella. We didn't have time to do anything else, really – just a bit of TV, chat and bed. We were so exhausted, we would be in bed by 9.30pm most nights. So we went on holiday to Corfu with the kids when we'd finished filming, which was lovely, really nice.

Working together has been a good thing for our relationship. We've had a really good laugh as well because we are both so deeply involved in it. It has been very rewarding, but by the time it goes on telly it will have been two years since we started. We joke that there have been three people in our marriage: me, David and Stella!

We have to be careful to draw a line. David is much more of an early morning person and I'm better in the evening, but we draw a line in the evening and that's our time.

My ideal night out is probably the cinema. We love Scotland if we can get a few days away – we love to go right up to the Highlands. We like walking.

When it comes to clothes, my indulgence is designer sunglasses, but what I really spend money on is skincare. I love Linda Meredith oxygenated facials, and I also like Dermalogica, which is fantastic. I take fish oil for skin, but my mother always says we have very elastic skin in our family. I love a good facial and a good massage quite regularly, depending on filming. I would do that over a big shopping spree any day. I don't get the designer handbag thing, though. I think it's mental, when you can get something that looks just as good from the high street.

Stella starts on Sky1 HD on Friday 6 January at 9pm w&h

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