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Stella

The Dame of Thrones

Lena Headey, the face of *that*
television phenomenon

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The Sunday Telegraph



The Game changer

From untrained Huddersfield actress to Hollywood star and a leading role in the phenomenally successful *Game of Thrones* – Lena Headey's trajectory sounds almost as fanciful as the series. But, as *Helena de Bertodano* discovers, good old Yorkshire feet-on-the-ground pragmatism still prevails

Photograph by **Amanda Friedman**

When strangers recognise the actress Lena Headey their reaction is almost always the same. "I'll be in a store buying beetroot and they'll come up and say, 'You're such a b—.' Or they'll say, 'Just f— slap that kid for me!'"

They are referring to her screen son, the monstrous King Joffrey in *Game of Thrones*, the fantasy drama television series that has become a global phenomenon and won numerous awards. Headey plays Cersei, a beautiful, malevolent and ambitious queen, who has an incestuous affair with her twin brother and dotes on Joffrey. In America more than 14.2 million viewers tuned

in for season three. In Britain the box set for the same series was the fastest-selling ever.

With season four about to begin, Headey, who recently turned 40, is at the height of her career. She plays another queen in the recent *300: Rise of an Empire*, a sequel to the 2006 blockbuster *300*. As Gorgo, queen of Sparta, she is equally bloodthirsty and vengeful but her moral compass is stronger. "I think Gorgo fights for the good. Cersei is not like that." Which one does she like better? "Cersei," says Headey, without hesitation. "I love her. I think she'd be a giggle to hang out with. You just don't want to get on the wrong side of her."

Headey herself sounds like a giggle to hang out with. Foul-mouthed and funny, she has little truck with conventional Hollywood niceties and, instead of the usual gush, goes so far as to tell me "not to bother" seeing one of her recent films as it is "terrible". Here is a sample comment from her, describing why she is happy to take on less popular roles: "There's no snobbery in me. I just like working and I'm grateful to f— work, and who the f— am I to think I wouldn't do that? F— that, it's a f— job, it's not a God-given right to be better than everybody else. It's just a f— job and it could end tomorrow." This is uttered amid guffaws of laughter.

As a result she not only does a lot in the fantasy genre, which until the success of *Game of Thrones* and the like was not a popular choice, but is also up for roles that others avoid. “I don’t mind playing a gay woman [in the romcom *Imagine Me & You* and the drama *Mrs Dalloway*] or a drug dealer [in the comic-book adaptation *Dredd*]. Those things are like fourth, fifth or sixth hand-me-downs – other actresses don’t want to be painted as a lesbian or drug dealer. But I just think, ‘Who gives a s—?’”

We meet at a house in the Hollywood Hills, not far from her own home. With short dark hair cropped at an angle, she bears little resemblance to Cersei. She is wearing a long denim shirt over baggy cotton trousers and black buckled shoes. “It’s all high-street malarkey,” she says dismissively, sitting in a rocking chair, looking out on a muddy slope of tangled tree roots.



She says she has never thought of herself as good looking. “I think I look slightly like a horse. Hand on heart, I think I’m pretty average. I’m a Northern girl, I’ve got a kid. Someone comes over and does my make-up every now and then if I’ve got to do something. I don’t think, ‘Oh God, I’m a looker.’ Maybe you just don’t see your own beauty.”

Recently she underwent a difficult divorce from Peter Paul Loughran, an Irish musician and the father of her son Wylie, who is nearly four. “I’ve done it without falling into bitterness or engulfing anger. I remember being on my knees in the middle of it because you’re really alone – as much as people offer

help, only you know how painful it is on so many levels. Even though there were times when I wanted to do terrible things, I kept thinking, ‘I’ve got to do it with a bit of grace because I want my son to look back and be proud of me.’”

But she hated the public scrutiny during her divorce: “I just thought, ‘You f— faceless t—. Just meet me in an alleyway and then I will be graceless.’”

Last year, during a dispute over the division of a joint tax refund, she told a court she was broke. She sighs resignedly: “Yes, there was a fascination with my bank account. Apparently I was down to my last five dollars...” Today she makes a point of saying she is financially



are visiting for three months from Yorkshire) and he said, ‘Well, we both know you didn’t go to school much.’ I looked at him and he said, ‘You don’t have to lie to me anymore, Lena.’ He knew I used to bunk off on trains.” Did she take a train to school? “No, but I would take a train away from school,” she says, laughing.

Aged 17, she was spotted in a school drama competition at the National Theatre, and later cast in a supporting role in *Waterland* (1992) and then *The Remains of the Day* (1993). After a variety of supporting roles, she landed the lead in the drama *Aberdeen* (2000), playing a cocaine-snorting London lawyer called to the bedside of her dying mother. By 2005 she was co-starring with Matt Damon and Heath Ledger in *The Brothers Grimm*. She had the lead

From far left Lena Headey in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*; as a young actress in 1994; in *300: Rise of an Empire*; at the Screen Actors Guild Awards in January; in series four of *Game of Thrones*



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stable. “I’ve rented for the last two years but now I’m looking for somewhere to buy ‘in the valley.’” She puts on an American drawl for that last word. “I can afford to. And I have a kid who scoots and skates and bounces balls.”

Born in Bermuda, where her father was stationed as a police cadet, Headey and her family later moved to Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, where she was, by her own account, a bit of a rebel. “Yesterday I was driving with my dad [her parents

role in the television series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* but, despite dozens of films under her belt, did not attain star status until *Game of Thrones*. Article after article has described her as being on the cusp of stardom. “I feel like I’ve never lived up to it. I’ve always been up and coming. But I’m still here 23 years later, steadily working.”

I ask if she realised that *Game of Thrones* was going to be such a hit. “No,” she says. “You never know. It’s such

a bizarre project – with dragons and incest and magic and wizards and zombies. But it’s very clever and each script is like a gift to me.”

She didn’t go to drama school and acts instinctively. “You make-believe that you *are* that person and that your environment is real. That’s the only way I can do it. I can’t fake it. I can’t be like, ‘I’ll just pretend to be...’ Clearly



I’m not a queen. The wig and the costume all help.”

Does the role linger with her after the cameras stop rolling? “Oh God, no. I come home to a four-year-old. I get a black eye and he’ll tell me he doesn’t want that old macaroni cheese. It’s like living a double life.”

She always used to say she would never live in Los Angeles. “Who knew?” she says with a laugh. “A TV show and a divorce later... I would move but my ex-husband wants to stay and I wouldn’t separate my family any more than it already is. LA offers some great living but it can be incredibly isolating when you spend all f— day in your car. I miss that

London thing of walking outside and bumping into mates and going, “Do you want to get a pint?” And you know that thing about the Brits where you sit and have a dinner party and you’re up until 4am and there’s 20 bottles of wine gone? Here there’s one bottle of wine and you daren’t ask if there’s any more. That is the cliché but it does happen.”

She finds motherhood exhausting and exhilarating: “It’s one of life’s mysteries how they go non-stop 15 hours a day. I’m so tired at the end of the day that we read a book and go to sleep together. We sleep in the same bed. [At first] I fought him over it, then I thought, ‘I’m going to choose my battles. If it makes him feel happier, sleeping in the same bed is not a big deal.’ He usually ends up lying on my head, but I love waking up with him because, guaranteed, the first thing out of his mouth will make me laugh. Usually it’s, ‘Mummy, I farted – can you smell it?’”



Single at the moment, she does not rule out remarrying. “My dream is to have more kids. I love being a mum and that’s been the hardest thing for me, trying to put to bed my desire to have more children. But there’s always adoption.”

As the years go on, Headey feels that she improves as an actress. “Life and its experiences give you plenty to chew on. You can only bring what you’ve experienced – whether it’s being broke or losing someone you loved or being really betrayed by somebody.” She wears her heart on her sleeve. “I’m driven by my emotions. I have to harness them sometimes when it’s not socially acceptable to go mental because

something has p— me off... I think life is painful and beautiful. You can’t let the hurt chip away at you. Life is f— risky, man. We bleed in so many ways.”

Since the age of 15 she has suffered bouts of clinical depression but learnt to manage it without medication until she had her son. “Then I had postnatal depression, which I didn’t realise for a long time. I went a bit nuts and eventually went to a guy who mixes Western and Eastern philosophy in terms of medicine and he put me on a course of something that changed everything. But I would never want to be dependent [on medication].”

Turning 40 was, she says, “a bit of a shock” and made her reflect on her career. “Do I really want to do this forever and be *judged* in five minutes upon my looks? It’s pretty brutal and it’s gravity-driven, let’s not lie. I’m incredibly un-vain, but that’s what happens: you

walk into a room, mainly full of men, and you’re judged.” She is thinking of turning to writing and directing. “That would be a natural progression for me.”

But it is unlikely to happen any time soon as Cersei, unusually for a *Game of Thrones* character, seems to have

a long life ahead. The series is based on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books by George RR Martin, who is currently writing the sixth instalment and is planning more. “My mum reads them avidly and apparently I’m still alive.” Yet Cersei’s future is unlikely to be a happy one. “I believe at her core she is very frightened and paranoid,” says Headey. “She’s a f— gambler. I always feel she’s carrying water in a basket with holes in it.”

Her own future looks brighter. “It’s been a rough few years. I feel like this is a rebirth for me.”

“*Game of Thrones*” returns to Sky Atlantic on Monday 7 April at 9pm