

Her role in *Sherlock* lit up Lara Pulver's career. Now she's playing a sci-fi siren in two new TV roles — but getting naked again is a no-no, she tells *Helena de Bertodano*

SHE'S ELECTRIC

I am expecting quite a lot when I meet Lara Pulver. She is, after all, the woman who was chosen for a role requiring “the face of the most beautiful of women and the mind of the most resolute of men”.

“What can I say?” jokes Pulver, 37. “It’s so true.” It is Arthur Conan Doyle’s description of Irene Adler, the role that transformed Pulver from a little-known Spooks actress into one of the hottest English talents in Hollywood. Playing the steely dominatrix in *Sherlock* who greets Benedict Cumberbatch naked — but for her diamond earrings and Louboutin heels — Pulver caused a sensation in the 2012 episode *A Scandal in Belgravia*.

“A casting director called my agent [after *Sherlock*] and said, ‘Where’s Lara Pulver been all this time?’ My agent said, ‘I’ve been knocking at your door for you to see her.’ Until you get the marriage of the right vehicle in the right project at the right time, no one knows what you can do — except your front room.”

After *Sherlock*, she played Ann, wife of the Bond creator Ian Fleming, in the television series *Fleming*. On stage, she shone in *Gypsy*, starring with Imelda Staunton in the West End and winning the 2016 Olivier for best supporting actress in a musical. Now she can be seen in two big television releases: Channel 4’s *Electric Dreams*, the sci-fi series adapted from Philip K Dick’s short stories; and, later this autumn, BBC2’s *The City and the City*, based on the thriller by China Miéville.

Arriving at the Los Angeles cafe where we have arranged to meet, Pulver does not immediately stand out. Admittedly, we are a stone’s throw from Universal, so almost everyone looks like a potential movie star. She’s petite (5ft 3in) and pretty in a white T-shirt, voluminous beige trousers and strappy flat sandals. “I think I’m softer in person than I appear on camera,” she muses. “The camera does things to faces — magic happens. I always look



Determinedly up Right, Lara Pulver; left, with Terrence Howard in *Electric Dreams*

regal on screen. I have to work quite hard not to come across as some sort of medieval queen.”

Inevitably, her looks dictate the roles that come her way. “If you have dark hair, blue eyes and pale skin, you’re the baddie, you’re evil. You’re never going to be the girl next door — although I’m probably more that in my day-to-day life than I am some crazy vampire woman.”

This is a reference to her recent role in *Underworld: Blood Wars*, in which she played a leather-clad vampire. But she is keen to prove that there is more in her range than vamps and nudity. After *Sherlock*, she was offered a lot of swinger movies: “I’ve been asked to play Irene Adler over and over again in different ways, but I’m not going to be the girl that just does nudity.”

Before appearing as Adler, she had signed up for the series *Da Vinci’s Demons*, in which she plays the seductive and politically astute Clarice Orsini. In the first season, she was not asked to do a nude scene. But in the second season, post-*Sherlock*, that changed. “There was nudity in every scene. I said I wasn’t comfortable doing it. They said, ‘But you’ve got a great figure.’ And I said, ‘You don’t get it, it’s

not about my figure, it’s not a self-conscious thing. I just don’t see why the man is clothed and I am naked in this scene.”

She is neither a vampire nor a seductress in her new TV dramas. In *Electric Dreams*, she appears in an episode called *Real Life*, with Anna Paquin as a policewoman who lives in the future and Terrence Howard as a game designer called George. Pulver plays Paula, a medical professional: “I’m a dear, loving friend towards George, who is struggling with his reality — he is living in a virtual world.”

In *The City and the City*, she plays Katrynia, the wife of a detective (David Morrissey) investigating a student’s death. “She’s rather an enigma,” Pulver says. “Her husband lives in a routine, scheduled world and she’s a butterfly, questioning everything. She’s much more complex than characters I’ve played before. She could be bipolar or depressed, she’s so up and down.”

Pulver herself is determinedly up, happily married to the actor Raza Jaffrey, who was also in *Spooks*, though at a different time, and enjoying their seven-month-old son, Ozias. Though born in Britain, both have lived in Los Angeles for years. “I never thought

I was very British until I came here. But I miss having people around me who have the same cultural references and sensibilities.”

Her first marriage, to the American actor Josh Dallas, ended in divorce. “It totally took the wind out of my sails,” she says, describing her devastation when they broke up. (He later married the actress Ginnifer Goodwin.) “I was 30 and divorced, and I went back home to my mum. I was in the room I had as a 14-year-old, going, ‘Where has my life gone?’ But after all the anger and hurt and grief, it was weirdly the best gift. Yes, things were handled really badly and people behaved badly, but I have to take some responsibility.”

She had known Jaffrey for years, but “never in a gazillion years imagined myself being married to him”. Both had just emerged from divorces (he was married to another *Spooks* actress, Miranda Raison) and found themselves in New York at the same time. They had dinner one night, but when Pulver asked him if it was a date, Jaffrey told her he didn’t date actresses. Pulver laughs. “It was a brilliant thing to say. I should have been saying, ‘I don’t want to date an actor.’”

By then, she was smitten. “Raz is the type of guy you spend time with — and you won’t want to spend time with anyone else. He’s so honourable and funny and wise and clever and silly. We’re both absolute silly goofballs.” One of the nurses attending their child’s birth was convinced he was a doctor, having seen him in the medical drama *Code Black*.

Born in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, Pulver grew up in a village near Sevenoaks, Kent. Her father left when she was 11, and she didn’t see him again for more than a decade. In hindsight, she says, she was aware there were tensions in her parents’ marriage. “It’s probably why I became an actor — I would do anything to make them laugh, I didn’t want them to break up. You overhear things like ‘You don’t



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show me any affection’ — so I would try to fix that by always just hugging my mum, hugging my dad.”

She credits her mother with keeping the family on an even keel. “My sister and I could be a bit of a mess.” The experience gave her a determination to be independent. “I think I lost faith in marriage, as my mother was really badly hurt. I wasn’t against it, but it wasn’t the be-all and end-all.”

As a child, she auditioned for *Annie*, won the lead role and later attended the National Youth Music Theatre, moving on to Bird College. She worked part-time as a barmaid to pay her way through. “I come from a family where you work no matter what. We didn’t have money just to go and do this stuff. It’s interesting when you hear about it being an elitist profession. That wasn’t my experience.”

Pulver maintains that actors use their peripatetic jobs too often to excuse their chaotic personal lives. “If you want to go to bed with your co-star, that’s your choice. When Josh and I first separated, people asked whether it was the distance. I don’t buy that you go to bed with someone else because you’re 5,000 miles apart for a week.”

The profession itself is not the problem, she thinks: it’s more the sort of people who are drawn to it. “Maybe it attracts people who are a bit vulnerable and have big wounds. They need affirming or validation, so when a co-star or an extra or whoever pays them attention, they respond.”

Recently, she has realised she can afford to be a bit more choosy about roles. “It’s no longer enough just to work — especially if it takes me away from my son. I’m not saying that it has to be Bafta-winning work all the time, or that it has to be a combination of Benedict Cumberbatch and Steven Moffat. But it has to be good storytelling — preferably without nudity.”

Electric Dreams, Channel 4, Sundays at 9pm; episode one is reviewed on page 18