

*From Oxford to Hollywood and back again via
meeting the Prince of Wales at Buckingham
Palace: Britain's hottest young star,
Gugu Mbatha-Raw, talks to
Helena de Bertodano*

*Photographs by Victor Demarchelier
Styling by Tracy Taylor*

Raw talent

GUGU MBATHA-RAW IS ON A quest. For a cup of tea. It doesn't seem like too much to ask: after all, it is mid-afternoon and we have met at the grandest hotel in San Francisco: the Fairmont, which sits atop Nob Hill. She has a word with the concierge who says that unfortunately tea is unavailable at this hour and advises us to try another hotel nearby. So off we go into the sunshine, Mbatha-Raw joking about how hopeless the Americans are at tea anyway: 'You get hot water and a tea bag on the side and they haven't even taken it out of the wrapping.'

The next hotel, almost equally luxurious, seems to confirm this. 'Tea?' asks the host in the lobby café: 'Of course.' He directs us towards a hot water dispenser and some paper cups. Mbatha-Raw and I look at each other, slightly aghast. 'We're so British,' Mbatha-Raw explains politely. 'Where can we just sit down and get tea?'

'Ah yes,' says the host, with just a flicker of a smile. 'Have a seat and John will be over to serve you your tea.'

At last we are settled comfortably in a corner with a pot of Earl Grey and some milk on the side. The café is quite crowded but, although Mbatha-Raw is now one of the most high-profile British actresses in the US, she goes unnoticed. Dressed in faded grey jeans, a white shirt and a big yellow scarf, she does not draw attention to herself: 'I'm living out of a suitcase at the moment so [I just wear] what's not too crumpled. Normally I'm top to toe in black, so you've got me on quite a bright day.' She is especially pleased with her beige suede Isabel Marant boots. 'I stole them from *The Girl Before* (her current BBC TV series); they were for somebody else[s character] and they didn't fit. So I thought, "As no one's wearing them..." Hilarious. I don't often steal things from shows.'

People often can't quite place her. 'Sometimes they say, "You're an actress aren't you? What have I seen you in?" And it's always cringey because it could be so many things and I don't really want to stand here and list my whole CV and they're going, "No, no, no..."'

It's certainly an impressive CV. There's been her breakout role in the award-winning period drama *Belle*, the riotous *Misbehaviour*, with Keira Knightley, and the neo-noir crime drama *Motherless Brooklyn*, with Alec Baldwin (we meet a

couple of weeks after he accidentally shot dead a cinematographer, which she describes as 'a shocking tragedy'). More recently, she's played celebrity wrangler Hannah in the Apple TV+ drama series *The Morning Show*, executive produced by Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon, and is in the 2021 Marvel TV series *Loki* with Tom Hiddleston, who was at RADA at the same time as Mbatha-Raw.

Right now, she is in San Francisco shooting another Apple TV+ series, *Surface*. But we are meeting to talk about *The Girl Before*, the BBC One psychological thriller series based on the novel by JP Delaney. Mbatha-Raw plays one of the leads, Jane, who moves into what seems to be her dream home, only to find that the landlord, played by David Oyelowo, has very strange rules and that a previous tenant – who looks uncannily like her – has died there. 'I thought it had an interesting combination of style and substance,' she says. 'The mystery of it was intriguing and also, to be quite honest, it gave me the chance to work in the UK after a long time on hiatus [in the US during the pandemic].'

For the past few years, Mbatha-Raw, 38, has lived in the States – in a flatshare with a friend in West Hollywood. But she recently gave it up and has just bought a house with a garden in Oxford, near where she grew up in Witney. She wanted to be closer to her family and friends, especially after feeling so stranded during Covid. 'I was [thinking]: "When am I going to see my parents again?" I remember when my mum couldn't get an Ocado order, I said, "I can do it because I'm in LA. I can be online at three in the morning [UK time]. I can get you a slot and make sure there's loo paper." That was a mad, mad time.'

Born in Oxford, Gugulethu Sophia Mbatha-Raw is the only child of Anne Raw, an English nurse, and Patrick Mbatha, a South African doctor and an ANC activist, who was forced to flee the country as a student. Her first name is a shortened version of *igugu lethu*, which means 'our pride' or 'our treasure' in Zulu. Her parents divorced when she was three and, although she remained very close to her father, she grew up with her mother, who took her to ballet and tap classes and facilitated her acting dreams: 'She supported me but I was the engine behind it.'

Nevertheless, her mother did not think

she should go to stage school, which is what Mbatha-Raw wanted when she was 12: 'In a way I'm glad I didn't now because I finished school and had a more traditional, stable upbringing. I think I'm fortunate in that I didn't have to worry about the business side of things as a child. Even though it seemed like fun, it makes you grow up very quickly... And I think it just made me more passionate about [acting].'

As a teenager she acted at the Oxford Playhouse and spent time at the National Youth Music Theatre. She also became head girl of her local comprehensive school: 'I got nominated by somebody. I was quite studious. I wasn't in a majorly geeky clique or a majorly popular clique, I was right in the middle. I felt like I could talk to everybody. I could move around.'

But she was keen to escape Witney: 'I was itching to get to London because of the theatre scene and the culture. It was way more exciting to me.'

Mbatha-Raw won a full scholarship to RADA, where – along with Hiddleston – contemporaries included Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Ben Whishaw. 'I knew them to say hello to but it wasn't like I knew them intimately at the time,' she says. 'I'm so proud of everyone who's done well coming out of RADA. Some people aren't [acting] any more, a lot of people had a lot of struggles.'

It took her a while to establish herself but in 2007, aged 24, she landed a role in *Doctor Who*. Then in 2011, she acted in a film with Tom Hanks – *Larry Crowne*. She also played Ophelia on stage to Jude Law's *Hamlet*, first at the Donmar Warehouse, then on Broadway, and had recurring roles in several television series. Yet her big breakthrough came in 2013 with the 18th-century period drama *Belle*, in which she played the lead, Dido Elizabeth Belle. The film, inspired by the 1779 painting of Dido beside her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray at Kenwood House and commissioned by their great-uncle the Earl of Mansfield, won multiple awards, with Mbatha-Raw taking three as best actress.

After appearing on a talk show to publicise *Belle*, Oprah Winfrey called her. At first she thought she was imagining things: 'I was doing Oprah and Deepak Chopra's 21-day meditation experience and it was around the end of that time that I got a call from her. I didn't answer it because I didn't recognise the number. And then >

Dress, POA, **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**. Jacket, £1,015, **VIVIENNE WESTWOOD**. Hat, £310, **ALBERTUS SWANEPOEL**. Ribbon, POA, **ELLEN CHRISTINE COUTURE**. Choker necklace, £1,625, and long necklace, £1,495, both **CHANEL**. Bracelets, £1,800 EACH?, **DIOR**.

Opening page, dress, £4,300, bra, £690, tights, £620, all **PRADA**. Headband, £TK, **TORSO VINTAGES**. Earrings, £2,680, and ring, 2,829, both **GOSHWARA**. Bracelets, £TK, **TORSO VINTAGES**.



Dress, £TK, **TORSO VINTAGES**. Earrings, £12,613, ring, £1,452, both **LANG ANTIQUE & ESTATE JEWELRY**. Necklace, stylist's own

To her surprise, it was Doctor Who that Prince Charles mentioned: 'I thought, "Oh my God, is Prince Charles a Whovian?"'

◁ I played the voicemail: it was like "Hi, it's Oprah." It was that voice, so iconic, that I'd been listening to every day and I thought, "This is so surreal." A lot of these meditations are focused on manifesting your best life and I thought, "Whoa, have I just manifested Oprah on my voicemail? This meditation is powerful stuff!"

Oprah told Mbatha-Raw how much she loved her portrayal of Belle and that she was a breath of fresh air. She invited her and the rest of the crew to lunch and then Mbatha-Raw met her again, alone, for another lunch 'when the cameras weren't rolling'. They became friends and have remained in touch: 'I feel like she's always there if I need to reach out. It's not like we're close buddies but I respect her so much.'

Mbatha-Raw has been single-minded in the pursuit of her career. She says she has always been 'very persistent... It's not like I was plucked out of drama school to be in anything hugely starry or high profile. I've always worked hard and there are a lot of things I haven't gotten. I've got close to lots of big things... I learned early on your talent is really not enough. You have to cultivate resilience and be able to bounce back from disappointment. You can't be too fragile. I think you have to have access to your sensitive faculties but you also have to know how to coach yourself along and give yourself a talking to and pick yourself up when you need to...'

Her resilience has paid off. In 2018, Mbatha-Raw was awarded an MBE for services to drama. A letter had arrived at her mother's house in Witney 'with some sort of royal stamp on it. And I remember joking to my mum: "Oh, it's probably the damehood." When I opened it I was shocked. My mum was thrilled. And it was very meaningful for my parents to be able to come with me to Buckingham Palace and have that ceremony with Prince Charles.'

To her surprise, it was *Doctor Who* that Prince Charles mentioned when he awarded her with the MBE. 'I thought, "Oh my God, is Prince Charles a Whovian?" He said he'd visited the set.'

In the US she has noted how charmed Americans are by the Royal Family: 'It sort of feels like a fairytale from an American viewpoint.' She is supportive, too: 'I'm sure it's not an easy life. And I'm sure we don't know the half of it. But I respect it.' ▷

◁ And although she has never come across Prince Harry and Meghan in Los Angeles, she feels sympathetic towards them: 'I wish them luck. It's a tricky transition to make.'

Indeed, her name is sometimes mooted by fans as someone who could play Meghan in *The Crown* – even though the creator Peter Morgan is so far insisting the show will end with series six, covering up to, but not beyond, the early 2000s. 'Oh my God, that's hilarious,' she says, sounding genuinely surprised. What would she feel if she was offered the role? 'I'd be very flattered; I'd have to consider it.'

She brings controlled poise and nuance to any acting role. Of Jane in *The Girl Before*, Mbatha-Raw says: 'She's driven and ambitious. I probably share that with her. [But] I feel like Jane is very restrained... I think I'm much more light-hearted and carefree.'

Indeed, Mbatha-Raw has one of the sunniest dispositions of anyone I have ever met. 'It's very un-British, isn't it,' she laughs. 'People are suspicious of it. They're like, "Hang on here. Wait a minute. Where's the problem?" I do think happiness is a choice to a degree. I think I've probably always been a naturally outgoing kind of open person. I'm always looking for an adventure and I think choosing to enjoy things makes life more fun.'

This attitude, she says, was reinforced by a moment of terror a few years ago. While shooting *Beyond the Lights* in Los Angeles in 2013, she was mugged at gunpoint and had to run for her life. 'I'm sort of thankful because it made me more courageous in a way,' she says. 'I felt like I had survived that experience and it made me meditate about fear. Everyone was so worried about me and so sort of, "Oh, my God, are you OK?" What happened is my brain slowed down and everything went into slow motion. And I wasn't actually afraid in the moment.'

Nevertheless, the experience made her reassess her life: 'I was thinking, "If my life had ended just then what haven't I done with it?" I had just turned 30 and I hadn't been to South Africa [where her father grew up]. So within a couple of weeks, I booked a ticket to South Africa for the first time. I guess I had been socially conditioned to believe that Johannesburg was a dangerous place and all of these dangerous things could happen to you there.'

And I thought: a pretty dangerous thing happened to me in West Hollywood and I'm OK. So, let me really confront the things that I haven't done in my life. I wanted to connect the dots of my roots, and it really motivated me to do that. Maybe that sounds like an overly positive way to respond to it, but it genuinely just made me realise life is short.'

She never reveals details about her private life – and the only boyfriend that has ever been mentioned is *Game of Thrones* actor Harry Lloyd, who she broke up with in 2012. Since then she has managed to keep any relationships completely off the media radar. 'I live very normally, I don't hide away, I think it's quite possible to have a personal private life.' She is used to politely dealing with any questions about it. 'I understand the curiosity but I think it's always healthy to have boundaries. As an actor I feel like the work speaks for itself and it's nice to be able to allow people to go on a journey with the character – without feeling like you need to know every single detail about that person's life.'

Some parts of LA life have inevitably rubbed off on her. She reads lots of self-help books, practises yoga (although I've always done yoga), meditates and keeps a gratitude diary. But she still comes across as down to earth and has a no-nonsense attitude to food. 'More than anything I eat for fuel,' she says. 'I'm not vegetarian or vegan. I have quite adventurous tastes when I'm not working. I love to try foods that I haven't eaten... And dessert always! I love a chocolate dessert or a tiramisu.'

Recently she has turned her hand to producing, working as both an associate producer on *The Girl Before* and an executive producer on *Surface*. One day, she says, she might also try directing but her main focus will always be acting. 'I love the childlike energy of play that you have as an actor,' she says.

Despite the ructions in Hollywood over recent years, Mbatha-Raw is glad to be working in this era: 'I think you want to live in interesting times. And we certainly are. There have been a lot of slow-boiling revolutions going on in the industry and in the world at large. I feel privileged to be living in this time where things, I think, are shifting for the better.' Although she says she does not feel she has experienced any overt discrimination, either as a woman or a person of mixed race, she

supports efforts to make the workplace more equal. In 2020, she signed an open letter to the UK screen industry urging their 'active engagement to tackle structural and systemic racism'. An accomplished artist, in the same year she auctioned some of her paintings, which included portraits of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, in aid of four charities, including Black Lives Matter. And today she's wearing a sweater with the motto 'I'm speaking' (the phrase became a feminist slogan when Kamala Harris used it in a vice-presidential debate). In February 2021, Mbatha-Raw became a global goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Two days later we meet again at the photo shoot at the Filoli estate outside San Francisco, a country house set in 16 acres of gardens and once used as the Carrington mansion in the TV series *Dynasty*. When I arrive, Mbatha-Raw is strutting around the gardens in a long apricot-pink chiffon Alexander McQueen dress, teamed with a feathered trilby. 'I'm channelling my inner Helena Bonham Carter,' she explains when she sees me. Later some vintage jewellery is added to the outfit. 'More is more,' she jokes. 'It's a bit pimpy,' says the photographer doubtfully. Mbatha-Raw acts affronted: "I was going for 'rock star...'"

She will soon start work on *Nobody's Heart*, a 1930s romantic drama based on William Boyd's short story *Cork*. Now, of course, she is in the position of being able to pick and choose the roles she wants: 'If you're privileged enough to be offered things then it's also a case of just taste and timing and thinking where you want your career to go. And what you want to say with the work you're doing.'

Her own taste, she says, is defined by 'things that move me. That doesn't mean moving me to tears but [it appeals to me] if the journey is exciting or something I feel I can't predict. So much stuff is derivative or feels like a watered-down version of something else.'

The same could never be said of Mbatha-Raw herself. 'To Thine Own Self Be True' is the motto on her Instagram page. She has never modelled herself on anybody. 'I never looked at anyone else thinking I wanted to be them. I always wanted to be me.' □

The Girl Before is available to watch on BBC iPlayer

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Jumpsuit, £7K, **TORSO**
VINTAGES. Coat, £663.12, **ADRIENNE LANDAU**.
Shoes, £790, **MIU MIU**.
Socks, £19, **WOLFORD**.
Earrings, POA, bracelet, £22,500, necklaces, POA, all **CARTIER**. Pinky rings (left hand), from £1,258, **SHAHLA KARIMI**. Ring (left hand, middle finger), £1,451, ring (right hand), £3,885, both **LANG ANTIQUE & ESTATE JEWELRY**

Dress, £1,040,
MISSONI. Shoes, £596,
ZANOTTI. Earrings, £5,099,
short necklace, £5,750, long
necklace, £3,630, all **LANG
ANTIQUE & ESTATE
JEWELRY**. Rings (left hand),
from £1,099, **SHAHLA
KARIMI**; and ring (right hand),
£3,686, **LANG ANTIQUE &
ESTATE JEWELRY**.
Bracelets, from £4,432, **LANG
ANTIQUE & ESTATE
JEWELRY**

Opposite page, dress,
£9,800, **DIOR**. Hair brooch,
£16,929, ring (left hand),
£4,428, ring (right hand)
£4,428, all **LANG ANTIQUE
& ESTATE JEWELRY**

For stockists, see Address
Book. Hair: Victor Jones-
Moore. Make-up: Zabrina
Matiru. Nails: Michelle
Saunders. Digital technician:
Evan Lee. Photographer's
assistants: James Gebilaguin
and Joe Lee. Fashion assistant:
Julia Virkler. Creative producer:
Camilla Fitz-Patrick. On-set
producer: Barbara Ve. Shot on
location at Filoli Historic House
& Garden

