RUTH WILSON

“We All Have This Capacity To Be Both Amazing And Awful”

As Ruth Wilson returns to our TV screens she talks to *Stylist* about angry women, readjusting her work-life balance and the importance of having a voice

WORDS: MEGAN CONNER

THE ENIGMATIC RUTH WILSON

Ruth Wilson is giving *Stylist* a tour of her apartment in Prague. “It’s beautiful,” she says, picking up her laptop and twirling around on Zoom to confirm it. We whizz through whitewashed walls and shiny parquet floors so she can show off the roof terrace outside. It’s a bright autumn day and the actor is dressed in a T-shirt with the doors flung open wide. “Look at that,” she says, angling the screen over rows of chimney pots for a panorama of the city. “Now, this is a city in lockdown…”

Wilson has been in Prague for 10 days, and during that time the city has descended into a state of emergency, with every non-essential shop, cafe and bar shut down. Currently, she’s still able to attend the film set where she is scheduled to be holed up until Christmas, but there’s every possibility that as infections rise she’ll be locked in here, on her rented apartment’s long beige couch. “Like lots of people, we’re living like monks at the moment,” she laughs. “But it’s amazing how your mentality adapts. Every day we get to actually do some work is a bonus.”

One thing that’s keeping morale up is the fact there’s company to be had. Wilson is in Prague to make *Oslo*, an HBO film about the 1993 Oslo Accords that formed part of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and last night entertained co-star Andrew Scott and another cast member with dinner and drinks at her flat. “I’m not normally one to do much cooking after a day at work but these are drastic measures,” she smiles.

AS THE FEARSOME MRS COULTER IN HIS DARK MATERIALS

In a year that's been strange and empty, you can sense her delight in getting back to her day job. Being idle doesn't come easily to Ruth, as a CV packed with theatre, movies and two major global TV series (*Luther* and *The Affair*) confirms. So it feels good to end 2020 with one project wrapped (she recently finished *True Things About Me,* an adaptation of Deborah Kay Davies' book about a young woman living on the fringes of society) and another – the much-anticipated second installment of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* – about to come out. A runaway hit for HBO and the BBC when the first series aired in 2018, the return of the beloved trilogy (which also sees her dinner guest and *Oslo* co-star Andrew Scott join the cast) feels like just the sort of sumptuous fantasy we need to escape into right now. "We shot it before Covid-19 even existed so it really is from another time," laughs Wilson. "I can safely say there is no coronavirus in it."

In what is turning out to be something of an iconic TV role for the actor, Wilson plays Mrs Coulter, the unhinged mother of Lyra who seems to captivate fans as much with her psychopathic tendencies as she does her vintage wardrobe. “The clothes are amazing,” says Wilson of Coulter’s satin dresses, fur coats and jewels. “But let’s be frank, she’s a crazy person.”

> “I RECORDED AN AUDIO BOOK FROM MY TOILET SEAT. MY FLATMATE HAD TO PUT DUVETS AROUND THE DOOR”

It’s a sideline Wilson does well, having already played serial killer Alice Morgan in *Luther*, to high praise. But it’s her Golden Globe-winning turn as grieving mother Alison Bailey in four series of the Showtime drama *The Affair* that brought her worldwide recognition and fame. Not that it’s been all plain sailing – while the series may have made her a star – Wilson’s abrupt departure in 2018 has been marred by controversy, with reports suggesting that Wilson felt compelled to leave because of a toxic work environment that pressurised her to perform nude sex scenes. Added to that, there were allegations that a male producer behaved inappropriately towards Wilson, leading the actress to take further action (citing legal reasons, Wilson has always declined to comment).

Still, having spoken out about gender pay parity in the past – it is widely believed that Wilson was paid less than her co-star, Dominic West, for her work on the series – Wilson is not one to bat away difficult topics, as our conversation attests...

WITH DOMINIC WEST AND JOSHUA JACKSON IN THE AFFAIR

2020 HAS BEEN A CHALLENGING YEAR. WHAT HAS IT FELT LIKE FOR YOU?

It's been a weird time and quite scary and stressful – at the beginning I definitely felt this thread of anxiety running through everything. We were about a week into making *True Things About Me* when lockdown started but thankfully we got to go back. Since September, it's been really busy – I've gone from finishing that in Malaga to flying here.

WHERE WERE YOU DURING LOCKDOWN?

I was in my flat in Bermondsey, which was interesting, because it's been a really long time since I've been there for any consistent amount of time. I think it was good for me, actually – I've wanted to readjust my attitude towards work for a while. I tend to go from one thing to the next and with everything that happened I just thought, 'You know, nothing matters anymore. Your job is fun. Just have fun.' So, I used the time to nest a bit, which I've never done. I bought loads of plants, I redecorated rooms, I got to know people in my community. And I did one small job, where I recorded an audio book from my toilet seat. I read a Virginia Woolf novel, *To The Lighthouse*, and my flatmate had to put duvets around the toilet door to soundproof it [laughs]. It wasn't the best – I had to keep going outside to shout at a bird somewhere above us that kept tweeting.

IT SOUNDS LIKE QUITE THE EXPERIENCE FOR YOUR HOUSEMATE…

I know! [Laughs]. Poor guy. Luckily, he's a family friend so I've known him a really long time but even still, we're not used to being around each other *that* much. But thank god I had someone – I think that if I'd been on my own it would have been really shit.

PLAYING SERIAL KILLER ALICE MORGAN IN LUTHER, WITH IDRIS ELBA

AS WELL AS STARRING IN *TRUE THINGS ABOUT ME*, YOU PRODUCED THE FILM WITH JUDE LAW, YOUR CO-STAR IN THE PLAY *ANNA CHRISTIE*. CAN YOU EXPLAIN A BIT ABOUT IT?

It's been eight years in development but there's something about the material that's never left me. It's about a woman who is sleepwalking through life – she's in her early-mid 30s and everyone else seems to be moving on and settling, and she's stuck. And then this guy comes into her life and she decides he's the answer, but he isn't. It's about the infatuation you can develop for someone, where you project everything you think you want on to that person – or what you're told you should want. It's about that pressure we feel to settle, to be with someone, to have kids – I mean, I've definitely felt that. And it's about this scenario we all know where you think you're totally in love with someone, and then the next minute, you find them utterly revolting [laughs]. You wake up one day and even the way they walk is off-putting. It can happen instantaneously, you know?

YOUR FIRST PRODUCING PROJECT WAS *MRS WILSON* BUT YOU NOW HAVE SEVERAL FILMS IN DEVELOPMENT. WHAT MOST INTERESTS YOU WHEN YOU'RE SEARCHING FOR STORIES TO TELL?

I'm most fascinated by the true nature of human beings. I love digging into the grey [areas] and the arguments that aren't simple, because we all have this capacity to be both amazing and awful. You only have to look at social media and the awful comments and you think, who posts these things? But in reality, there are probably people very close to me who post that stuff – of course there are.

IN THE PAST, YOU'VE SPOKEN ABOUT ISSUES AFFECTING WOMEN IN YOUR INDUSTRY, SUCH AS THE GENDER PAY GAP AND FEMALE NUDITY ON SCREEN. HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR YOU TO USE YOUR VOICE IN THIS WAY?

It's a difficult one because I know speaking out helps and we've seen that having these kinds of debates in public can really effect change. But it's important to be measured and think about who you're speaking to, and how you're effecting change. I don't think it's as simple as jumping on things and cancelling someone for a bit of news, put it that way. And so I'm very careful about that – I have an aversion to saying too much.

RUTH STARRED WITH JAKE GYLLENHAAL IN BROADWAY PLAY CONSTELLATIONS

THERE'S BEEN MUCH CONTROVERSY AND DISCUSSION IN THE PRESS SURROUNDING YOUR EXIT FROM *THE AFFAIR*, WHICH YOU'VE CHOSEN NOT TO SPEAK ABOUT. WOULD THIS BE A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THAT?

[Nods]. I think so. It's complicated, but the reason I haven't gone into *The Affair* is that I haven't worked out how to discuss it. I feel like there's a lot of noise and anger surrounding it, and really the power rests with me to choose how I discuss my life and my experiences – it doesn't rest with the press or people demanding answers. What I have done is share my experiences when talking to students, because I think it can help them if they have to face similar things in the future. And I suppose what's important to say is that I did speak up. I did have a voice. I did stand up for myself. There was a situation on *The Affair* where things didn't feel right, and I dealt with them, and I managed to protect myself. It was before #MeToo and before Harvey Weinstein and yet my instincts were very clear and strong about what I felt was wrong, about what was going on and what I didn't feel safe about.

I THINK ONE POSITIVE TO COME FROM #METOO IS THE NUMBER OF INTIMACY COORDINATORS NOW OVERSEEING SEX SCENES ON SET. HAVE YOU COLLABORATED WITH ANY YET?

We just had one on *True Things About Me* and I have to say having an intermediary really helps. Even if it doesn't end up being a long-term thing, intimacy coordinators are an enormous step in the right direction because awareness has already grown immensely. I don't think it's a surprise that you get better sex scenes... I'd love to know how the actors on *Normal People* felt making theirs, for example, because on screen they look so connected and free.

***NORMAL PEOPLE* WAS SUCH A BIG HIT THIS YEAR – WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU ENJOYED WATCHING?**

To be honest I'm pretty shit at watching anything, because I don't have a TV. I have a projector screen that I can link up to things but I've never had a TV. During lockdown my housemate and I got through *Succession* and that was great – we watched it every night and finished it in about three weeks. But I'm more of a documentary person – I've just finished *World War II In Colour* on Netflix, and I also loved *My Octopus Teacher*, about this guy who goes wild swimming in the Atlantic and connects with an octopus. The footage is extraordinary.

RUTH TOOK INSPIRATION FROM ALAN RICKMAN IN ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES FOR HER ROLE AS MRS COULTER

ASIDE FROM TV, WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN ON YOUR CULTURAL RADAR?

My favourite podcast at the moment is a meditation app called *Waking Up* with Sam Harris. He's a neurologist who has really provocative conversations with scientists and politicians and theorists, I can't get enough of it. Books-wise, I'm currently reading something called *Entangled Life*. It sounds weird but it's a book about mushrooms, and it's fascinating. Such little research has been done on mushrooms but they're the connective tissue of nature. If a nuclear war happened, they'd be the first things to grow.

WE'RE ABOUT TO SEE YOU BACK ON SCREENS AS MRS COULTER IN THE SECOND INSTALMENT OF *HIS DARK MATERIALS*. WHAT DREW YOU TO THAT PROJECT INITIALLY?

I'm a huge fan of the books and there are so many questions Philip Pullman deliberately leaves unanswered, you can really go to town as an actor. But also, she's just a great villain. I'd never done a fantasy before, or anything kids could watch, so I wanted to do something for my eight nieces and nephews and two godchildren.

I READ THAT WHILE PREPPING FOR THE ROLE OF ALICE IN *LUTHER*, YOU WATCHED EVERY ICONIC PSYCHOPATH FILM YOU COULD GET YOUR HANDS ON. WERE THERE

ANY PARTICULAR REFERENCES THAT HELPED FOR MRS COULTER?

Oh, I've definitely put a bit of Alan Rickman in there [laughs]. I wanted to go a bit *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves* with Alan, to push the humour. And then I looked at Hedy Lamarr and Snow White – I thought Mrs Coulter should be a bit of Snow White *and* the Wicked Stepmother because she needs to look appealing to children. It's why she's always dressed in lovely fabrics like satin and velvet and fur – on the outside she's the image of perfection but underneath she's this rageful, crazy woman...

WITH JOE DEMPSIE IN 2017 BRITISH FILM DARK RIVER

YOU SEEM TO RELISH PLAYING VILLAINS…

Oh I do, they're such good fun, and I appreciate they're rare. When Alice came up on *Luther* it struck me that psychopaths are so rarely played by women – I'd never read a character like her before. I had to go and study male versions, like Hannibal Lecter, to see the fun those people get to have playing them. It's odd really, because women feel rage all the time, and we rarely get to see it. Men are always smashing their heads against mirrors or something on screen… Why can't we?

I'M INTERESTED TO KNOW WHEN YOU LAST FELT RAGE?

I grew up with three brothers, so I'm essentially half-boy – rage is just in me [laughs]. Most of the time I try to take it to work. But that can be quite tricky when you're feeling rage about Brexit…

UNFORTUNATELY, IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE ON THAT FRONT…

I know, and it's tough! Sometimes I think about moving to Europe – I've been thinking about it a lot lately but I've come to the conclusion that really I'm a London girl.

WHERE WOULD YOU GO?

Well, I have no languages, so it's going to be tricky. At the moment I'm working with actors of all different nationalities, so it's sort of inspired me to learn a bit more French on Duolingo. I mean, I say I'm learning French. Every day I just log in and answer the same questions to make me feel good about myself [laughs].

***His Dark Materials* is on 8 November, 8.10pm, BBC One**

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN RITTER/THE LICENSING PROJECT, GETTY IMAGES