



The Joy OF JOANNA

Joanna Lumley reveals what an honour it is to be the first woman to host the Baftas since 2001 – and why charity work is so crucial.

By Susan Griffin

It's a year of firsts for Joanna Lumley. The actress and activist turns 72 this May, but she retains her thirst for embarking on new and exciting challenges.

On Sunday night she will host the British Academy Film Awards, when Hollywood's glitterati, including Annette Bening, Gary Oldman and Kristin Scott Thomas, will walk the red carpet at London's Royal Albert Hall. She is the first woman to preside over the event since Mariella Frostrup co-hosted in 2001, and takes over from Stephen Fry, who decided to step down after presenting the ceremony 12 times.

Fry's a tough act to follow, but the ever-unflappable and eternally glamorous Lumley, herself no stranger to wry observations, is an impeccable

replacement. And she's clearly elated about her new appointment.

'Honestly, how exciting is this? It's just so unbelievably thrilling. Who thought I'd turn into Stephen Fry?' she exclaimed following the award nominations in January.

'I want to thank Bafta so much for asking me to do this. I said yes incredibly quickly.'

Lumley credits Fry with being a 'staggering and unbeatable and matchless host'.

However, she's delighted that '[Bafta] chose me, as a woman, this year, because it's 100 years since women got the vote – women over 30, I might add... which includes me.'

The no-nonsense Lumley is typically matter-of-fact about the night's responsibilities. 'My job is to keep the evening contained and going along

and being not quite a headmistress but somebody who's completely even-handed about it,' she notes in that distinctive voice of hers.

Lumley's no stranger to award ceremonies, having received two Bafta TV gongs for her portrayal of the cigarette-puffing, champagne-quaffing Patsy Stone in the Nineties comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*.

And last year she was bestowed Bafta's highest accolade, the Academy Fellowship, in honour of her five-decade career on screen.

'It's actually more emotional than you can even think,' she said of the occasion. 'I was immensely touched and immensely proud.'

Perhaps it had particular resonance as Lumley did not receive formal training at drama school.

She was born in Srinagar, Kashmir, in the last days of the Raj, to British parents Thya and James, a major in the 6th Gurkha Rifles.

In 2007, Michael Parkinson commented on her upbringing, observing that children from similar circumstances often appeared 'more self-sufficient, resilient, with a different approach to life'.

She considers the point. 'I wonder how much of that is to do with the travelling, which was immense, because you never flew in those days. You always went on long boat journeys and had lots of time on your own, so time for mucking about,' she muses.

'You also had the great benefit of different languages being spoken, of understanding different religions... you had a sense of a larger world.'

Before she boarded in England, her family spent two years in Hong Kong, a city she revisited for her 2015 documentary *Joanna Lumley's Trans-Siberian Adventure*. 'What was lovely about Hong Kong was to find the old hotel and the markets, which felt >

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Lumley with a Bafta



BAFTA/MATT HOLYOAK; BBC; REX



Left: *The New Avengers*
Above: *Absolutely Fabulous*

the same, the stalls and the hustle-bustle about it,' she recalls. The series also saw Lumley return to Moscow, where she modelled during the Sixties.

'We stayed in the same hotel during the TV series. Of course, when I'd stayed there it had been taken over by the communists and had babushkas on each floor, counting you in and counting you out like border guards,' remembers Lumley, who reportedly shuns a 'glam squad' in favour of cutting her own hair and applying make-up herself for photo shoots and TV appearances.

Lumley's acting career began in 1969 with a small, uncredited role in the film *Some Girls Do*, followed by a fleeting role in the Bond movie *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, a short-lived but memorable appearance as Elaine Perkins in *Coronation Street* in 1973 and her iconic turn as Purdey in *The New Avengers*.

She's since starred in a diverse range of movies – notably, kissing Leonardo DiCaprio in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* and reprising her role as Patsy in *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie* in 2016.

She'll soon appear alongside Celia Imrie, Imelda Staunton and Timothy Spall in the British film *Finding Your Feet*, in which she plays Jackie, one of the members of a seniors' dance class. 'Jackie was a professional bar-rister and was very good at doing divorces,' says Lumley of her character. 'She has quite a bit of money, has been married five times, so is maybe not the easiest person to live with, but is very feisty and she loves belong-ing to this dance club.'

The actress, who's been married to the conductor Stephen Barlow since 1986 and has a son, Jamie, from a former relationship with Michael Claydon, was drawn to a film that 'celebrates friendship and optimism'.

'These people who join clubs and get on with each other have a laugh. Plus, they do dances that you wouldn't expect people of 60 or 70 to do,' comments Lumley, who was awarded an OBE in the 1995 New Year's Honours.

Lumley's success also extends to the theatre. Among many credits, she was nominated for a Tony Award for her performance in *La Bête* in 2017, and later this year returns to the stage when she embarks on her first ever tour, titled *It's All About Me*, which begins in Belfast on October 6.

She'll be joined on stage by friend and producer Clive Tulloh, who will ask Lumley questions submitted by the audience.

'The thought of this tour, travelling across Britain and Ireland, has completely taken over my waking hours,' she says.

'It's utterly thrilling to start plan-ning the stories I can tell, and the rapture – and gratitude, to be fair – with which I shall greet the audi-ences. Nothing like this has come my way before, and I may have to be dragged off with a hook at the end of each show. I think it will be fabulous.'

But however busy she is, she'll al-ways make time for her charity work and activism.

'In my book, if you can do stuff, you ought to do it,' she says.

'I love it and I've seen the great difference it can make. I'm so hooked on it and it's such an important part of us as human beings, I think it's a privilege to do it.' ■

◆ *The Baftas are on BBC1 this Sunday, 18 February. Finding Your Feet is released on 23 February. For information on Lumley's tour It's All About Me in October and November, and to buy tickets, call 0844-844 0444, or visit www.ticketmaster.co.uk*



As Elaine Perkins in
Coronation Street