

It's a voice quite unlike any other; delicate as an orchid, rich and comforting as a simmering pot of nonna's ragu.

I'm being indulged with a dose of nostalgia as heady as the trademark timbre that delivers it. It's the mid Sixties, sexual revolution scents the air and Joanna Lumley – who else, sweetie? – is sweeping me through the streets of London as she recalls the modelling days that would later inform her Bafta-winning *Ab Fab* creation, Patsy.

"It was very exciting but it was also scary," says Joanna, who arrived in the capital in 1964 and encountered an intoxicating palette of short skirts and thick eyeliner. "I don't think we were as rich as we are now. You see in the pictures just how skinny everybody was; not just the girls, but the boys.

"We didn't eat between meals, we didn't stuff ourselves with food like we do now and there wasn't this fantastic obsession with food, where every newspaper and every magazine has a massive amount of pages entirely devoted to food. And we wonder why our nation gets fatter and fatter."

Times were a changin', but pragmatism blunted excess. "We didn't have very much money and so you never got drunk. There weren't drunkards around like there are now because we couldn't afford drink. Unless you were very rich you couldn't afford dope even.

"A joint would go round six people at a party and you would go, 'Woo!' but only the rich got really stoned. Heroin didn't really exist, smack and crack and all those things didn't exist."

This isn't so much Joanna longing for yesterday (when perhaps all our troubles

seemed so far away), but merely painting life as it is – as it was.

Born in Kashmir a year after the Second World War, she was exposed to the vivid colours and heavy storms of Malaysia and Hong Kong at a young age before moving to Kent to attend boarding school aged eight.

"The school was tiny; 60 or 70 children and only about 11 or 12 were boarders. It was completely different from every single thing I had known, but I've always been quite a cheerful creature and you go, 'Oh this is new, I'll do this'. I had been moving a bit and so I had got used to saying goodbye to school friends and moving on to the next place."

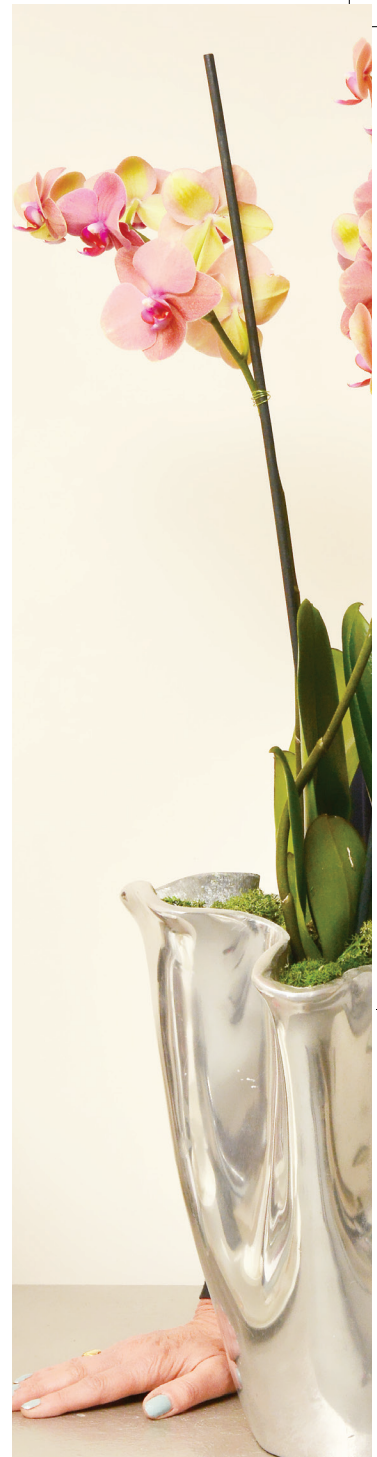
Did travelling teach her to be stoic? "I was never brought up with luxuries and at boarding school you [had] strip washes. This idea of hot showers every day is rubbish, you stand by a basin or if you're in a tent with a lamp or a candle, you stand by a bucket of water and wash yourself.

"I don't find that shocking or frightening or odd. My mother was very good at teaching us how to have respect for the natural world. I'm never afraid and I don't think, 'Ooh there might be a snake here', because we were taught to handle snakes."

Charisma and natural warmth seem etched into Joanna's DNA; has she always had an inherent sense of joie de vivre?

"You're kind to say that, I think I was just a show-off!" she says. "I'm an optimist, I like the world and I tend to like anything before I dislike it. I was born, I think, without too many critical faculties. Unless I think it's really bad and then I think it's horrible and fight it."

While the Bolly-slugging Patsy may loom large in our public consciousness, 73-year-



Hello, sweetie

The inimitable Joanna Lumley talks life before fame in 1960s London and the upcoming Kids for Kids charity concert she's hosting in Belgravia

WORDS: JONATHAN WHILEY



Belgravia — October 2019

“

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old Joanna is arguably closer to the karate-chopping *New Avengers* star Purdey for which she made her name. Never having shied away from a battle, her steeliness and mettle were most memorably on display during the Gurkha Justice Campaign when she fought tooth and nail for the soldiers to be given the same rights as their British and Commonwealth counterparts.

Her fearless nature, aided by her upbringing and travels, means very little fazes her. Rudyard Kipling's famous lines of those who can walk with kings, yet keep the common touch, seem entirely fitting.

“Being different isn't horrible,” she says. “I'm not afraid of staying in a stately home or meeting royal people, I'm not afraid of sitting down in the gutter with people who haven't washed for seven years and haven't got any teeth. These things don't frighten me. What I hate most is indifference. If people don't care, that is the hardest one to fight.

“People who are fiercely pro cruelty are easy to put your fists up to and fight, but people who don't bother to vote or turn off lights, there is something terrifying. It's like punching a cloud.”

Among her many charitable ventures is Kids for Kids, a British charity founded to help children in Darfur, Sudan. This year Joanna, who is a patron, will host its annual Candelit Christmas Concert at St Peter's in Eaton Square alongside a starry collection of guest readers including Barry Cryer, Timothy West and Miriam Margolyes.

The charity was set up by Patricia Parker and operates a unique microfinance system

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in one of the most abandoned parts of the planet. The poorest 15 per cent of families in villages in Darfur receive a “goat loan”; six animals that can provide milk for starving babies and life-saving nutrition. In turn, the flock grows and mothers earn an income from selling milk and yoghurt.

“What I loved about Patricia is that she was training people to help look after the animals, but most importantly along with animals are the people. Building up schools and having midwives trained and planting trees. She is an extraordinary woman.”

She is too modest to admit it, but Joanna is rather extraordinary too. Interesting and interested – rare among the famous – she appears to live entirely in the moment, spreading her infectious brand of charm.

Perhaps the best showcase has been her gloriously evocative travel documentaries – ITV is soon to air her new series on Cuba and Haiti and she has a three-month trip to Australia in the pipeline – where her appreciation of needles among the haystacks comes to the fore.

“Yes I am grateful for everything,” she says thoughtfully. “I think [now] there is a slight, rather dismaying sense of entitlement that people think they ought to be having more. People think they ought to have a house. I rented flats because I couldn’t afford a house until I was 40.

“I don’t know what a mobile phone costs because I don’t use one, but it must cost quite a lot to be using a mobile phone... it’s just changed. I’m not saying it’s better or worse.”

Certainly the nature of fame has changed since Joanna first lit up our screens, starring as a Bond girl in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* before an array of roles from sassy

spy Purdey to quintessentially English Aunt Emma in Hollywood blockbuster *The Wolf of Wall Street*, where she famously smooched Leonardo DiCaprio (about 15 times, in fact).

When fame arrived, she says, it was something of a thunderbolt. How does she imagine she would have fared if she were thrust into the limelight now?

“I don’t know, because I have my old-fashioned ways of thinking,” she says. “We don’t ever feel the age we are. I’m 73 but I still feel about 32 or 27 or 15. I don’t feel like an old woman, which I am now.

“But then if I was brought up now, I would be quite a different child and I would be quite disgusting. I would probably be on *Made in Chelsea*. Well I wouldn’t because I wasn’t and I wouldn’t, I don’t know why I’m saying that. That looks scornful. I’m not being scornful, but it’s very, very different.”

Scornful doesn’t seem part of Joanna’s

vocabulary, but her candid nature is refreshing and delivered in that velvety voice, almost irresistible. Little wonder strangers approach her every day for a hug – “I love that” – and naturally, she receives her fair share of fan mail. There are some, she says, that have been particularly memorable.

“I’ve had two or three letters from people who have swerved out of suicide by watching episodes of *Ab Fab*, or people who have suddenly been enthused by travel programmes,” she says. “Or people who have just listened to something or picked up something in an interview like yours Jonathan, where they have thought, ‘I might try that, that might just work.’”

Kids for Kids’ Candlelit Christmas Concert is on December 5, 7pm at St Peter’s Church, Eaton Square. Adults £35, children £15. Visit kidsforkids.org.uk



Above: Joanna Lumley speaking at a previous Kids for Kids event

Joanna on...

Darfur

“So odd to think that Darfur is a name we only knew 20 to 30 years

ago and now in our strange and troubled world, we turn our eyes onto something else. Darfur has been utterly abandoned. Not only abandoned by the Western world and the benefactors, but its own country.”

Being young

“We were poor when we were young. We shared flats, rooms, clothes. We shared everything and happily lived off scraps. If you were lucky enough to be taken out to dinner by a boyfriend, you would take the bread roll and put it in your bag so you could have it for breakfast – or give it to somebody for breakfast – the next day.”

Finding fame

“Fame was not something anybody wanted. I’m not saying they dismissed it but you just didn’t search for it. Now when almost the only object in quite a lot of young people’s minds is being famous – hence Instagram and trying to have a following – I’m not saying it’s bad, but it’s completely alien to the way we were brought up.”

