

Modelling, fame, entitlement and the
charity close to her heart – we set the
world to rights with the absolutely
fabulous Joanna Lumley

BY JONATHAN WHILEY

Golly! More Bolly?

Sassy spy Purdey, Bolly-slugging Patsy and the most English of English aunts in Hollywood blockbuster *The Wolf Of Wall Street*. Sweetie, is there any role Joanna Lumley can't master?

Now 73 – though you would barely know it – her karate-chopping, champagne-swigging antics have lit up our screens for decades. Oh, and then there is *that* voice; delicate as an orchid, rich and comforting as a simmering pot of Nonna's ragu.

We're here to discuss a charitable venture close to her heart, but first take a trippy walk down memory lane.

She is sweeping me through the streets of London in the mid Sixties, where sexual revolution scents the air and life was an intoxicating palette of short skirts and thick eyeliner.

"It was very exciting but it was also scary," says Joanna, who used her modelling days to inform BAFTA-winning AbFab creation Patsy. "People were smoking pot and 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 have very much money and so you never got drunk. They 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, 'wool!' 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'."



Joanna Lumley in the
Grand Bazaar in Istanbul
Photo by ITV/Shutterstock



Did travelling teach her to be stoic? "I was never brought up with luxuries and at boarding school you have 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. I don't find being dirty odd or frightening or sad making. 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 seemed etched into Joanna's DNA; has she always had an irresistible and 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."

Among her many charitable ventures is Kids For Kids, a British charity founded to help children in Dafur, Sudan. This year, Joanna, who is a patron, will host its annual Candlelit 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 in one of the most abandoned parts of the planet.

The poorest 15 per cent of families in villages in Dafur 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, benefiting the whole community.

"So odd to think that Dafur is a name we only knew 20-30 years ago and now, in our strange and troubled world, we turn our eyes on to something else.

"Dafur has been utterly abandoned. Not only abandoned by the Western world and the benefactors, but its own country. 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."

Joanna more than has her moments too and 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 – perfectly illustrates her appreciative nature. "Yes, I am grateful for everything," she says. "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."

"I think [now] there is a slight, rather dismaying, sense of entitlement that people think they ought to be having more."

When fame arrived, she says, it was something of a thunderbolt and incidental to her acting career. "When people recognised me after *The New Avengers*, it came – and it sounds naïve – as a complete shock.

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“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.”

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 she receives her fair share of emotionally charged fan mail.

“I’ve had two or three letters from people who have swerved out of suicide by watching episodes of AbFab, 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,
St Peter’s Eaton Square, December 5, 7pm.
Adults £35, children £15. Visit kidsforkids.org.uk*