



The irrepressible Ms WALTERS

In a rare interview, Julie Walters talks to GH about everything from her Catholic upbringing to her stellar career – and her new-found respect for Mary Whitehouse

Julie Walters strides in, barely out of breath after six flights of stairs. Introductions are made: photographer, creative director, stylist... Julie's main concern is remembering our names, so she goes round the circle again, repeating them. We're all struck by her fantastically even, tanned skin – she scarcely looks 48, let alone ten years older than that.

She is unerringly self-deprecating, despite notching up an impressive five Baftas, two Oscar nominations and a Golden Globe nomination – and it's this refusal to play up to her A-list status that's earned her such great affection from the British public. On the day of our shoot, she arrives late, but only because her make-up artist, Chrissie, was stuck in traffic. Julie took advantage of the delay to go shopping. 'What did you buy?' 'Boots,' she replies. 'What kind? Leather? Patent?' 'No!' she roars with laughter. 'I went to buy a few bits and pieces at Boots the Chemist.'

With a strong sense of the absurd, Julie revels in our cross-purpose conversation. She's just back from 10 days in Antigua with her best friend of 30 years, actress and fellow Calendar Girl, Rosalind March. 'Everyone thought we were lesbians,' she says. 'The place was full of couples, and then there was us.' They played up to it, of course, with Julie asking Ros: 'Would you like more soup, dear?' Even formal occasions are a source of amusement. Julie has been to Buckingham Palace twice, to receive her OBE and CBE. 'There was a lot of giggling in my row. It's hard to keep a straight face when someone is receiving an award for services to chiropody.'

Julie Walters first came to our attention in *Educating Rita* in 1983 and has since starred in critically acclaimed films such as *Personal Services*, *Calendar Girls* and *Billy Elliot*. Among her favourite television roles was Marie Stubbs in *Ahead Of The Class*, about a Glaswegian headmistress taking over the helm of a tough London school from murdered head teacher Philip Lawrence. But it's not all gritty reality – her partnership with Victoria Wood produced the memorable *Acorn Antiques* character Mrs Overall (another favourite) and *Petula in Dinner Ladies*. 'I like intelligently written pieces. They need to be interesting and they need to have integrity to them,' she says.

Pushing 60 can be a tricky time for actresses, though Julie's career seems unaffected. 'It's harder for women as they get older, but I think that's changing because there are more women writers. I'm not

bothered about being 60 and lines don't worry me. I'm not saying I'd stop having highlights and let my hair go grey, but being frail in any way would bother me. I'd hate to be totally infirm.' Her fear of not being able-bodied is so great, she would even consider euthanasia. 'I wouldn't want to live if I was sitting in a wheelchair dribbling.'

Later this year she returns to the role of Molly Weasley for the fifth time, in *Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince*. She's also appearing in the screen version of hit musical *Mamma Mia!* playing Meryl Streep's best friend Rosie. It's a riotous caper, set on a Greek island, with a joyful Abba soundtrack. The cast sing a host of Seventies tunes and had to learn some challenging dance routines.

'I sprained my ankle at the end of *Dancing Queen*,' says Julie. 'It was all strapped up, but I still had to perform the big finale, which started with me skipping through an olive grove. I was supposed to wear huge platform shoes. I did it without the platforms, but my co-star Stellan Skarsgård is over 6ft tall and was wearing his. I'm only 5ft 3½in. He was towering above me and I ended up doing most of the scene staring at his bollocks!'

She also had to get used to Meryl Streep behind the wheel. 'She drives like a demon. We had to use a jeep in the opening scenes – I never do my own driving, but Meryl insisted on doing her own. Christine Baranski, who plays the third friend, Tanya, was terrified. I thought Meryl was probably in control, but I found it hair raising.'

One recent project close to her heart was for the small screen – playing Mary Whitehouse in the BBC2 drama *Filth*. It is a role that intrigued her and made her re-evaluate her opinions of the formidable 1960s 'anti-smut' campaigner. 'She figured highly in my teens and 20s. She was a busybody. It felt like she was spoiling our fun.' But Julie warmed to her during filming. 'She was a good-hearted person. I agree with her that things shouldn't be pushed out of the television at us – we should have some kind of say over what we watch. I was touched by her relationship with her husband and family. I like real stories about people, especially when you scratch below the surface and your preconceptions are altered.'

Mrs Whitehouse was disgusted by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which Julie – 18 in 1968 – felt a part of. 'Women were suddenly in control of >

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JULIE WEARS Top, DKNY at Fenwick. Earrings, Dima Jewellery. Bangle, Carré Copenhagen

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'We lead separate lives when I'm filming. It suits us'



The Wood/Walters mix made memorable TV



Learning fast: Educating Rita, with Michael Caine, won her an Oscar nomination



Julie's own favourite, Mrs Overall



As Mrs Whitehouse in the TV drama Filth



A royal appointment with husband Grant

of 16,' she says. 'When I came home from college, mum would ask me to go to Mass and I always said no. I don't like organised religion now but Buddhism seems the most interesting to me.'

Despite everything, she and her mother had a bond. When Mary died suddenly in 1989, aged 74, Julie found herself driving alone round their old haunts. 'When we were sorting through my mum's old things, I came across a box of newspaper clippings that she'd kept charting my career. It shocked me really and I did shed a tear.'

Julie has a close relationship with her own daughter, Maisie, now 20. 'Maisie prefers me not to speak about her life. She should be allowed her privacy. But we have a great relationship. She can talk to me about anything,' she says. Her autobiography (to be published in the autumn) stops at Maisie's birth, specifically so that Julie didn't have to write about the traumatic years when her daughter was suffering with leukaemia.

When she's not filming, Julie spends as much time as she can on the organic livestock farm in West Sussex where she lives with Maisie's dad, Grant Roffey, 50. They have been together for 22 years and married for 10. 'I love the wildlife, the quiet and privacy, the owls at night and the fact there is no light pollution,' says Julie. 'I love the way the moonlight illuminates the garden and the fact you don't need a torch when it's out. I love the smell of the earth and of the animals.'

It sounds romantic, but it plays havoc with family life. 'It's very hard to get away. Farming is seven days a week, 365 days a year,' says Julie. 'We talk about the farm non-stop and wonder if The Archers have got a mole at our place because our little dramas always seems to end up in their story lines. Grant and I lead separate lives when I'm away filming, but it seems to suit us. It wouldn't suit everybody. Like most couples, we have hidden bonds and often you don't know what it is that makes your relationship work. Analysing it is tempting fate a bit.'

Our chat is coming to an end and there are kisses all round before Julie heads off to London's trendy Soho Hotel for a drink. The last thing we hear is the Walters cackle receding down the stairs – all the way to the ground floor. **GH**



JULIE WEARS Top, Graham & Spencer at Fenwick. Trousers, Agnès B at Fenwick. Necklace, Dima Jewellery. Shoes, LK Bennett. Hair and make-up, Chrissie Baker

'When I started acting, my mother told me I'd end up in the gutter by the time I was 20'

sex. She was right that you can't go round shagging everybody. There's more to relationships than shagging, but we didn't see that at the time.

'I started nursing that year and they put all the nurses on the Pill, mainly so our periods would be regular and we wouldn't have any 'women's problems' once a month, but presumably they didn't want anybody getting pregnant either.'

Julie's mother, Mary Bridget O'Brien, a postal clerk from a tough Irish Catholic background, also had reservations about the decade's liberalism. They clashed when 19-year-old Julie announced she was moving in with her boyfriend, David, and giving up nursing to study acting at Manchester Poly. 'Oh, there was trouble over that. My brothers had to stand between us. She told me I'd end up in the gutter by the time I was 20. But my mother and I clashed because we were very alike,' she says.

Mary had moved to Birmingham when she married Julie's dad, Thomas Walters, a builder and decorator. Julie remembers her mother as fiercely ambitious for her children. 'Her attitude was: don't rock the boat, be respectable, get a good education and good jobs. She had impossibly high standards – you had to come first. Second place didn't matter.'

Julie's secondary education, at Holly Lodge Grammar School for Girls, in Smethwick, Birmingham, wasn't a success. 'I wasn't academic. I got four GCSEs. I scored the lowest grade in maths and history. I sat in the history exam not knowing one question on the paper. I just scribbled down any old rubbish.'

But the worst part of her school life had been before that, when she was sent to a private Catholic school in Birmingham. 'My mother thought I would become a young lady.' But the nuns tried to beat her Black Country accent out of her. 'I was hit and hit in elocution lessons by those nuns. I could not bring myself to say "barth". My dad said "bath" and I didn't want to betray him. I tried to tell my parents what was happening by saying things like: "The nuns are really frightening". But they just thought it was funny and laughed.'

Didn't she hate her mother for sending her there? 'I didn't. She was just doing what she thought was best. I hated those nuns.' But the experience did put her off religion. 'I'm a lapsed Catholic since the age >



JULIE WEARS Coat, Basso & Brooke at Joseph. Camisole, LK Bennett. Trousers, Agnès B at Fenwick. Shoes, LK Bennett. Earrings, Fenwick