

TV Close-Up: Michelle Ryan

by Eirik_Knutzen

Walking into a pub, Michelle Ryan knows that she can beat the crap out of just about any man nursing a pint of beer there. Before slipping into her role as the new Jaime Sommers in a "re-imagined" revival of "The Bionic Woman," the 5-foot-7, comely British brunette spent a month pumping iron with a personal trainer and various teachers of krav maga, a dirty street-fighting martial arts form that employs knees and elbows to exposed body arts.

MICHELLE RYAN - Michelle Ryan portrays bionic woman Jamie Sommers, a girl with a little something extra, in the new TV drama. CNS Photo courtesy of Mitchell Haaseth. Strong as a water buffalo, the 23-year-old welterweight sans a single fat molecule has all the confidence in the world now to portray the new buff title character of "Bionic Woman."

"After training with those guys five days a week, I'm sure that I would know how to handle and defend myself in any situation," said Ryan, a natural gym rat. "It also means that I do most of my own stunts and fought scenes for the sake of realism; I go home with bruises on most days."

Besides the character name of Jaime Sommers played by the very blond Lindsay Wagner, not much is left of the original "Bionic Woman," which went off the air in 1978, six years before Ryan was born. The original show was a spinoff of "The Six Million Dollar Man," the enormously popular action series starring Lee Majors as Col. Steve Austin, an astronaut rebuilt from scratch at great taxpayer expense in the wake of a crash involving the test of a moon-landing craft.

Col. Austin became bionic when was given two new legs, a right arm and left eye by an eminent surgeon, Dr. Rudy Wells (Alan Oppenheimer). Shortly thereafter his fiancée, Jaime Sommers, was badly mangled in a sky-diving accident.

She went bionic when prominent neurosurgeon Dr. Rudy Wells (Martin E. Brooks) installed two recently manufactured legs, a right arm and a left ear - for excellent long-distance hearing. Both subsequently went to work for the U.S. government's Office of Scientific Information, battling bad guys on an international scale.

The freshly minted Jaime Sommers, on the other hand, was grievously injured in a massive automobile crash engineered by an extremely angry and spiteful half-bot named Sarah Corvus (Katee Sackhoff). Fortunately, the driver of her vehicle is her dull fiance, Will (Chris Bowers), a sharp surgeon for a shadowy quasi-governmental organization called the Berkut Group run by Jonas (Miguel Ferrer).

Before you can say "Bob's my uncle," Jaime is outfitted with two shapely, state-of-the-art legs, a fine-looking arm, an excellent eye for detail and enough circuitry in her head to make Bill Gates jealous. Grateful for the prompt medical attention apparently paid for by Medicare, Ms. Sommers signs up with Berkut to fight bad guys globally at her doctor's side.

"I've only seen a couple of clips from Lindsay Wagner's version of 'The Bionic Woman,' but I'd love to meet her someday," said Ryan. "As a child, I remember thinking that she seemed like a very nice, very pretty lady, and that her character was strong yet vulnerable. She still has those qualities, but expresses them differently. Thirty years ago, the idea of someone having a bionic arm seemed farfetched. But I read the other day about a man with a bionic arm; with cloning and technological advances, it doesn't seem farfetched anymore."

Ryan - who earned considerable recognition during her five-year run as Zoe Slater on the English soap opera "EastEnders" - is part of the huge British invasion of actors playing Americans on new fall U.S. series. She thinks that Hugh Laurie's "House" paved the way for a half-dozen mostly London-trained thespians.

The young actress, who quit "EastEnders" two years ago to pursue other opportunities, worked steadily in such British television and feature film projects as "Jekyll," "Flick," "I Want Candy," "Cashback" and "Marple: By the Pricking of My Thumbs" until "Bionic Woman" came along.

"Last February, I auditioned in London for some American TV pilots, including 'Bionic Woman,'" she recalled. "Basically, I put myself on video tape, which reached the NBC Network in Los Angeles. They liked what they saw and immediately flew me to California for interviews and another audition. I found out a few days later that I had the job."

By July, the lass from Enfield, Middlesex, found her own apartment for the first time in Vancouver, home of the "Bionic Woman's" American production team. It was a relatively smooth transition as she remains single and apparently unattached after her engagement to footballer Tommy Williams of St. Albans City fell apart about six months ago. Ironically, her previous relationship was to a star of the British series "Footballers' Wives," Gary Lucy.

The daughter of a makeup artist and a firefighter (now a fire safety inspector) fell in love with acting at 10 after absorbing a smashing production of "Grease" in the West End. She promptly joined a drama group in Enfield, then dropped out of school at 16 to pursue her dream. A few weeks later, "EastEnders" came along.

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