

JOANNA LUMLEY

An interview by Nicholas Leahy



There has been a disruption in the time and space continuum. The element tin has been assigned . . . I had been asked to lunch with Joanna Lumley, the actress who plays Sapphire opposite David McCallum as Steel, the two time detectives in the television series, *Sapphire and Steel*. The spot chosen was ATV studios at Elstree, where the psychically inexplicable seems to regularly and reliably occur, demanding their presence. The steak on my plate had been grilled and not otherwise subjected to any mysterious forces, as Ms Lumley joined me to tell me about her supernatural adventures. A forthright and composed woman, she speaks with rapid assurance to put me at ease in the all too worldly noise of the studio restaurant. The show has a novel premise. Its writer, P.J. Hammond, a veteran of *Z Cars* scripts, thought of doing a supernatural police show, so he created two agents, called "elements", dispatched from an unknown source in the universe to correct any disruptions in time and space

caused by unexplained phenomena on Earth. The elements are Sapphire, who has the power to commune with psychic forces which have entered human beings, and to stop time itself, when necessary, for a while. Steel is her mentor and intellectual guide. Without her, he would be powerless, but if she were without him she would be taken over by the forces she

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encounters. To say the least, they are pretty indispensable of each other, and in the twice weekly, early evening serial stories, they do create a dense, satisfying air of mystery. If sometimes the show's questions about the latent powers of the human mind are as vague as its answers, then its makers would claim that they are providing entertainment about the

unexplained, not solutions. The writer does have one theme which can be usually relied upon to be arresting, as it is so unusual. It occurred to him that stories about time travel feature people going from the present back into the past or forward into the future. He thought of fragments of the past or future itself actively intruding into the present, often for some sinister purpose at the direction of some unnamable being controlling the people involved. Sounds a lot like good old fashioned evil to me. The time Joanna Lumley has spent so far in making the second series has not dimmed her loyalty to the character.

"Sapphire, I think, is probably stronger than Steel", she says. "She seems to be more adroit in the mental capability, that can get them out quickly from trouble. It's very difficult, because you see, when you work on this show as closely as we do, you actually . . . I mean, we're constantly on the watch for not letting it become too confusing. Dense mystery is very exciting, but it's also

inclined to make the viewers turn off, because they simply can't be bothered. But some points are quite clear. For example, Sapphire's eyes turn blue when she's going to phase time around, forwards or backwards an hour or a day, or whatever. So that's the time trick we established very early on in the first series.

"In the first series, we weren't completely successful. We were seventy five percent successful. For instance in the station story (*where soldiers of the past return courtesy of a middle-aged, amateur psychic enthusiast*). To be successful, we should have turned time back, and saved the little old psychic man. I mean, he actually had to be sacrificed, which was wrong, because Sapphire and Steel were at fault. And by the time he was going to die, he knew he was going to die, and did it wonderfully." Very heavy for children? "But great, I think, actually," she says. "Quite moral stuff in there, quite a lot of regular human morals creeping into this."

In the new series, there is a story about a couple who came back from the

future to live in a flat in the present, to sample the novelty of living in such primitive conditions. A let's-play-at-living-in-The-Iron-Age style enterprise, doomed to failure, of course. And another story about a costume ball in the style of The Thirties held in a country house, which becomes the physical host for the ghost of a similar, original event. Are there any

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interesting scenes or effects in them she likes? "I haven't seen any complete shows. Because things that you don't think are going to work, work magically. And other things which you were rather hoping would be a success, have been elbowed because they didn't look quite so good." Is it like constructing a mosaic? "Very much. We do it more like film than

television, apart from the very odd occasion that I can remember. We did a twelve minute take in the séance scene in one of the station sequences, with all the cameras going. The special effects are done in such weedy details. People disappearing, and running locked off cameras and mixing alternate images. Actually making it interesting but dull at the same time. It's the script, technology. Very much people in the control room who add to the atmosphere, some of them work so frightfully hard, and it's so simple, that it's just exceptionally good." It still feels like a card trick rather than actually sweating for a result? "Absolutely," she says.

How does Joanna Lumley see the characters of Sapphire and Steel? "I'm certain that enemy, in this case [the episode being recorded], is evil, and Sapphire and Steel are good. But I've also worked out that we're ghosts. We did a long time ago, which is why we are able to disappear and flash in and out of walls, and turn time backwards and forwards."

But do you have human bodies: "Oh, we must. It's essential we must. Or else I would have to be an appallingly barren, plastic person. In the first series, Sapphire cut her hand and it bled. She's human when she wants to be, but then she can cut her hand off and put it back on again." So for the time and space detectives in this show, it takes a ghost to tackle a ghost? "Yes," she says. "But they're not all human ghosts either. Ghosts are more flexible and they're not lumbered with the things that make people more inflexible. They're always at the service of good, but they're more susceptible to evil. The soldiers on the platform in the first series were all taken over by evil because they were all burning with resentment because they had been killed unfairly. And evil manipulated them there." She agrees that the writer is trying to make optimistic choices for both the human and ethereal characters, without becoming too vapour.

Joanna Lumley was born in India, became a fashion model in The Sixties, and an actress appearing occasionally on television in the Seventies. She recently became well known playing Purdey in *The New Avengers*, opposite Patrick MacNee and Gareth Hunt. After an avenging secret agent, she was teamed with David McCallum, who found fame in the Sixties as Ilya Kuriyakin, the Russian spy and friend of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*

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What kind of work would she like to do in the future? "I should like to be asked to do some acting, rather than performing," she says. "It's no use trying to impose it on the show, because it may not fit the character. I'm much more interested in the show than my own career anyway, so I ask myself what would I do if I had to act? I don't have to do it with a song on my lips and a follow spot on me. But on the other hand, merely being somebody like a Sapphire or a Purdey, is good, but limits you. I should like to mimic a real woman. So rather than having to be yourself, looking as pretty as possible. Purdey was invented, she didn't come out of a book. I made her up. Sapphire didn't exist until I fleshed her out, she wasn't real. I should like to *mimic* somebody."

How do children react to her as Sapphire? "I think I do everything for children," she says. "They have great minds, actually, and such generosity. I love to tell stories to them. They're not interested in art, it's just fun. They're not so critical as an audience, they just say, come on, give it to me. One of the nicest things about children is that their optimism is two hundred percent. They're extremely good at seeing what



A selection of scenes from the ATV series *Sapphire and Steel*, with Joanna Lumley and David McCallum in the title roles.

they want to, and rejecting phoney attitudes." Does she like to protect them from disillusionment? "As much as possible," she says fervently.

The question about *Sapphire and Steel*, going on the air as it does at seven o'clock at night, is whether it was originally meant to be a children's programme or not. It seems that that was certainly not writer P.J. Hammond's original intention. "That would have been awful," he said. "It is true that *ATV* were in two minds at first, whether to put it on in the children's hour or not, but then they decided that as it had an unusual format that did not fit into a specific

category, they would hire two television stars and make it as an adult programme they could be aimed at all the family." The writer had no specific actors in mind when he wrote the first script. But he says now that the faces of Joanna Lumley and David McCallum seem to fit perfectly the vague ones he had in mind at the time. Now that they are acting the parts, he says: "They're perfect. I couldn't imagine anybody being better in them."

Joanna Lumley is pleased to hear it, and comments on David McCallum. "You know, he's a very attractive looking man, and with his looks, he could have gone for being effective and charming and all



that. But he hasn't. He's gone for playing *Steel* as angry and intense, and determined to get on with it. That's interesting, and really very good. Children, they're afraid of him, but they know that they can come up and hold my hand and it'll be all right. They're frightened by *Steel* and they trust *Sapphire*." You're like a surrogate mother and father to them? "Yes," she says.

On the set after lunch, Joanna Lumley appears wearing a black evening dress at the top of a circular flight of stairs which end in mid-air off camera, with David McCallum in a tuxedo. They wander down in between takes into the two room

set of a country house, where a young girl and party-goer walks around smiling with a silver dinner knife permanently sticking out of her waist. Off set, six grown men are gathered in obsessive concern as one of their number drops a clay ashtray on the ground to break in front of a camera. Sitting in the dining room, I hear David McCallum, in the droll, quiet English accent that used to belong to *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, but is still his copy-right, say during a moment's studio pause for frustration. "My name is Luke Skywalker, princess. I have come to rescue you." More mysteries in the fictional life of *Sapphire and Steel*. ●

