

Rock On, *Sweetie*

After spending just an hour in the company of the absolutely fabulous Joanna Lumley, *ANNABEL HARRISON* is inspired by her attitude towards helping others, enchanted by her personality and delighted by her sense of humour



I CAN HEAR THE distinctive voice before I catch sight of its owner. From behind a heavy velvet curtain come the mellifluous tones of Joanna Lumley, so familiar from her outstanding two-decade turn as Patsy in the “glamorous and ridiculous but bloody funny” *Absolutely Fabulous*. Over the last few years, though, Joanna has appeared in the press far more often for her involvement with international causes, whether spearheading the Gurkha Justice Campaign or teaming up with Sir Ranulph Fiennes to raise funds for Seeing Is Believing, Standard Chartered’s global initiative to tackle avoidable blindness.

When we meet, on a bright autumnal day, I find myself awed and motivated in equal measure by her truly inspiring attitude, which certainly isn’t too good to be true. “I can’t divide charity from living, and I’m not sure you should. What I like is doing stuff that might make the world better. If I can do something, I’ll do it. If it will help, what’s not to like?” There’s no question about it; Joanna agrees to almost anything she thinks might help others. “I’d heard of CHIVA (Children’s HIV Association) Africa’s work, although I wasn’t directly involved, and when they got in touch last November, I thought; ‘what a fabulous idea’.” This idea was to secure the help of a dozen high-profile (and mostly British) celebrity artists and artistic celebrities for Stars Rocking All Over the World; on 14 November at Sotheby’s, 12 wooden Stevenson Brothers rocking horses, hand-decorated, designed and signed, will be auctioned to raise money and awareness for CHIVA Africa. Joanna is delighted to be included on the roll-call of equine artists, which includes Maureen Lipman, Dame Judi Dench, Stephen Webster and Amanda Wakeley, and her enthusiasm is palpable; “The horses are ravishing! In a funny way, giving should be gorgeous; you should look forward to it. The idea of people spending, quite rightly, like a kicking horse, to get one of these horses makes me so happy.”

Joanna was particularly excited about this initiative because of her “thwarted ambition in life”. Her best friend at school went on to do “what we both

loved doing best; now she’s a professional painter but I got sucked away into this other world. Whenever I have an excuse to do something like this, secretly I say ‘well, it’s for charity so of course I must do it!’ I couldn’t have loved doing her more.” ‘Her’ is the charmingly named Sally O’Sullivan, named after “such a dear friend of mine; Peter O’Sullivan is about the grandest name you can imagine, and Sally is a lovely kid’s name, with a rocking sound to it. Sa-lly O-Su-ll-e-van. She’s the rocking horse I always longed to have.”

The inspiration for Sally, with her Joanna (and Patsy)-esque blonde hair, a body in vivid, “unhorse-like” colours and a bright pink saddle, came from the carousel on the South Bank. Joanna spent two or three days painting, hoping to create “a slightly 1960s, hippie-ish sense of freedom; the plan was to have it quite symmetrical but then I thought; no, because you can never see two sides of a horse at once! And what child wants symmetry? I’d have it in the drawing room and sit rocking on it while having a cocktail and a smoke,” she adds, with a wide smile.

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Each horse has been photographed in their favourite place in London, so Sally was taken to Waterloo Bridge: “I wanted her on the bridge, with wind blowing in her hair, the Thames in the background.” The personal touches are what make these horses so special; Joanna’s is signed *Rock on, sweetie! Love from Joanna* and there is a secret pouch inside the saddle with things like a feather “so you remember to fly” and a little note explaining the meaning of all the items contained within.

“I don’t know who’ll buy her; she’s a little jewel. She must stay in a family, as an heirloom.”

In supporting such a wide range of charities, Joanna has an informed opinion about the general public’s relationship with charitable giving. She points out that while many people do want to help to feed a starving baby, for example, “so much of what we do in the world of assisting is training, transport, putting up buildings to house the hospitals etcetera, yet people would rather go for the cute baby. Adolescents tend ▶



Above, from left/ Melien (Julien MacDonald & Melissa Odabashi), India (Kelly Hoppen), Mara (Kimberley Gundle), Zulu (Amanda Wakeley), SNOW (Dame Judi Dench) and ORSON (Maureen Lipman)

► to get left out because they get spots and aren't as cute as children. What I love about CHIVA Africa is that it does something for AIDS, which people tend to shy away from, for children and for adolescents; they're training and educating people to look after their own sweet progeny suffering from this awful disease, so it's brilliant in every way."

Attitudes have definitely changed. "In the old days, charity was what old biddies did, knitting socks, and it was seen as fusty and old. Then those brave boys like Bob Geldof rocked the world and made it cool to do stuff for charity; before you couldn't get a young person to put their name to anything. I worked for disadvantaged children in the UK in my 20s and I was the only one of my age. But Bob changed all that and now it's cool." Someone once dared to ask Joanna, provocatively; 'what's the point of throwing five quid at Africa?' "Pay for seed, or a scythe. We showed the farm, the corn, the cutting, the family eating the wheat, and we said; that's what five quid can do if you 'chuck it at Africa'."

I am certain that it's this utterly compassionate nature, as well as roles in the much-loved *Ab Fab*, *The New Avengers*, *Sapphire & Steel* and *Coronation Street*, that have led to Joanna being deemed 'a national treasure' and unlike some others who seem embarrassed by the moniker, Joanna says that she was "SO touched when I first heard it; I thought it was enchanting." She thinks that perhaps "it becomes a term of endearment for people who've been around for a long time, and I've been around a LONG time; people have "laughed a lot at me [as Patsy] who's clearly a ridiculous and disgusting but very funny old thing. If you have the privilege of working on something like the

Gurkha Justice Campaign, people think you're a good old sort. It's a clap on the back; like saying, you're a mate, actually, and I like that."

Despite going to the EU to fight for animal welfare and the Gurkha Justice Campaign, Joanna is emphatic about the idea of a career in politics: "Never, never, never, never, never. Something happens [in politics] and the best hearts are bent; the processes are so labyrinthine and I'm too impatient. I can push the chairs back, now; we don't need to get in furniture removal people, and health and safety. That's why I don't want to go into politics; it's cumbersome." However, one thing she won't do is give up and her heartfelt words on the

matter make me want to hug her; "it feels like a losing battle but one thing I've learnt in life is never stop trying. The second you throw the towel in, the corner might have just been coming. You've just

got to hang on and hope for the goodness of people."

In the pipeline for Joanna are more philanthropic ventures, as well as a potential travel series, which would be "somewhere colossal and pretty fab". She'd love to do theatre again, although it will depend on "first of all, who wrote it, then who's going to direct it and where it's going to be." Out in November is *The Wolf of Wall Street*, in which Joanna has a couple of scenes. She speaks about the experience with comic delight; "in one's life, when would you ever think that you would get to make a Martin Scorsese film and kiss Leonardo DiCaprio?! It's like a mad dream. Scorsese was brilliant – he's one of my great heroes – and I've admired DiCaprio since he started acting. To my great joy, he's a darling person and a proper actor. I so didn't want him to be a brat and he so wasn't. I've lied slightly, though, and said that we had to do the kissing scene 27 times so he could get the hang of it!"

I ask if the 30-year-old Joanna could have ever imagined how her life would turn out. "She'd just got the part in *The New Avengers* and she'd be very pleased; oh, you're still rocking on! All my life, I've longed to get older because I knew a freedom from anxiety would come when I was grown up. All sorts of things drop into a better perspective." However, being the young Joanna sounds a lot of fun. She lived for 18 years on Addison Road in a top-floor flat: "Into that flat came people of such glamour and magnitude, even though I rented it and it was only £14 a week. Ava Gardner came to my flat for a party once. I thought it was paradise. We used to open the windows and sit with our feet hanging out over the little tiny balcony, and smoke cigarettes and look at the trees. I adored it. I started my life in Earls

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Above / Terry (Squint Ltd)



Photography: Featureflash / Shutterstock.com



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Court so I was very much that part of London. It was a huge wrench when I went like a traitor south of the river; you feel like you've left a lump of you behind."

The now 67-year-old attributes her appearance, jokingly, to "plenty of make-up!" Her skincare secrets, for those of you keen to emulate Joanna's graceful ageing, are Astral – "the only cream I'm not allergic to. Cheap as chips and never been tested on animals" – and Imedeem. Her sense of humour is brilliant; when I ask who she'd like to play her in a film of her life, without missing a beat, she declares, to gales of laughter, "Leonardo DiCaprio!"

Another more serious character trait that strikes me is how knowledgeable Joanna is about subjects that matter to her. She's not going to have a tombstone because of the size of the global population and the rate at which it is growing and she's off to Brussels next week to talk to the European parliament, "yet again", about animal welfare. Joanna is a vegetarian and she is passionate about this subject; "I can't bear that we've become so casual in the treatment of so many millions of animals, suffering every day because we'd like to have bacon or chicken for supper."

I end by asking Joanna where we can begin to help others as she does. "Start," she says. "Don't ask other people; just do it. Find it in you. Everybody is sweet; if I stumbled over on the pavement outside, somebody would come and help me. Clear your head and hear who's calling for you; somebody is. It may be an elderly neighbour who is lonely and would just like one visit a week. That needn't be called charity though; we've got to take the do-good thing out of this and just make it living. Do as you would be done by."

I hope that perhaps one of you reading this would like your children to be inspired by this remarkable lady and that you will bid to bring Sally O'Sullivan home. ■

chiva-africa.org / starsrocking.com

STARS ROCKING

The 12 rocking horses will be auctioned at an invitation only event on 14 November at Sotheby's. A limited number of tickets are available to purchase via the website. All lots will be available for absentee/pre-auction bids and 100 per cent of the funds raised will be used to further CHIVA Africa's Paediatric and Adolescent AIDS Programme in South Africa. For more information or to make a bid visit starsrocking.com or contact starsrocking@chiva-africa.org