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Lady's Day

LIZ PARRY speaks to *Downton Abbey* star Michelle Dockery about the worldwide popularity of the period drama, guest appearances in series five and the changing face of her character

AS THE ICILY imperious and immaculately attired Lady Mary Crawley, Michelle Dockery plays one of the most intriguing and best-loved characters in *Downton Abbey*. The eldest daughter of Lord and Lady Grantham, she has endured her fair share of scandals and drama over the course of four seasons to date, winning her legions of fans across the world.

Downton is now in its fifth series and its global success continues unabated. Since its debut in September 2010, the post-Edwardian drama has been sold to more than 220 territories and was watched by an estimated 120 million people around the world in 2013. "The show just ignited, somehow," says Dockery, when asked about the secret of its success. "It was to do with the time and with it being a drama written about 18 different lead characters. It just seemed to catch on with people. And it continues to do so."

When *Downton* first appeared on our screens four years ago, we were given a glimpse into the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants on their fictional Yorkshire country estate. In each series we see how the historic events of the day affect the cast's lives, with the sinking of the Titanic in series one, the outbreak of the First World War in series two and the Teapot Dome Scandal in series four. The depiction of WW1 brought to life the harrowing nature of war in a particularly vivid way, from the horror of the trenches to the fears and worries of the family and friends left behind. In witnessing the repercussions it had on these fictional characters as they lived through the conflict, we were given an insight into everyday life during the Great War.

Much of the show's success is down to dramatic and often shocking storylines penned by writer-creator Julian Fellowes, which have left viewers on the edge of

their seats. With so many lead characters, each with their own complex and compelling storylines, Fellowes has created a world that leaves audiences enthralled. "There are always things that surprise you," says Dockery. "I do the same thing as the audience, where I try and predict what's coming for all the characters, and not just for Mary; 'Oh I wonder if this will happen or I bet that will happen' and it's never what you expect!"

As the show has progressed, each character has had their own struggles to deal with but Lady Mary was dealt more than her fair share of trouble and turmoil during the last series. After losing both her sister Sybil and her beloved husband Matthew, we watched her battle with profound grief and struggle to bond with her young son George. Fortunately series five shows a softer side to Lady Mary, and a new era in her life begins as she

Fellowes' depiction of the First World War brought to life the harrowing nature of conflict

becomes involved in the running of the Abbey. "I'm really glad that she's now in this new chapter and embracing her independence," says 32-year-old Dockery, reflecting on the changes her character has undergone. "There's a part of me that feels like the old Mary, from the first series, has come back again. Her wit and quite cutting remarks are coming back and it represents that she's confident; she's got her mojo back. As a character, I've always admired her confidence. She's very assertive, which I think is a trait of the aristocracy. As much as last year was enjoyable, it being a challenge going through ▶



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► that grief as the character, this year it's very, very different because she's happier."

Series five, set in 1924, brings with it new faces, including much-loved British actors Anna Chancellor and Richard E Grant, new storylines and also new fashions for the characters, particularly Mary. "She's out of mourning clothes so she's not in black any more, or lilac; the designer decided that she would be very much on trend with the fashions [of the time]. It's been amazing actually, looking into all the new designs coming in. There's a very Chanel-like quality now to a lot of the clothes and for me it's been great because

The introduction of American characters (Shirley MacLaine and Paul Giamatti) have added to the show's appeal in the US

I've got a slightly more interesting wardrobe than last year. And there are some quite risqué outfits! There are different shapes for the dresses, and lower backs and the ankles are on show now.

"Looking back on the first series it feels like a very different show. That Edwardian period was very restrictive, with skirts right down to the floor. I've learnt a lot from the designers on the show, like knowing which and what colours suit you. Certainly my interest in fashion has really been as a result of the show."

From an aesthetic point of view, *Downton* is a feast for the eyes, with its stunning locations and period fashion. The majority of the filming takes place at Highclere Castle in Hampshire but the locations for the Christmas specials have ranged from Inveraray Castle in Argyll to Alnwick Castle in Northumberland.

The combination of lavish sets, a quintessentially British cast and attention to detail has surely contributed to its global appeal. The class differences and the various rules and taboos of the time are so far removed from the modern world that viewers can't help but be fascinated by these tales of a bygone age.

Another contributing factor to the show's success seems to be the closeness of and camaraderie among the cast, often shown at events together in big, smiling group photos. "We're all very supportive of one another and it has become like a family," says Dockery. "We've been doing this for five years and if anyone's in a play we all try and get together as a group and see each other. We all support different charities so if there is a fundraiser for someone's charity we do these *Downton Abbey* galas where we get together and we put on a bit of a cabaret. That is a lovely thing for us to get to do outside of work and have a really fun night."

The introduction of American characters in the form of Martha Levinson, played by Shirley MacLaine, and her son Harold, played by Paul Giamatti, have added to the show's appeal in the US. Indeed, many of the cast have spoken about the amount of attention they get when they're in the States. "There are two girls who come to all the press events that we do; they're always there," says Dockery. "We have such amazing support from fans [in America] and people really go out of their way to catch us at an event. It's wonderful."

As the show continues to go from strength to strength, *Downton* fans will no doubt be hoping that a sixth series is on the cards. Dockery, however, is coy about revealing anything about the future of the show. "I've had a lot of fun this year," is all she will say. "It's been a fun year for the character." ■

Watch series five of *Downton Abbey* on Sundays at 9pm on ITV

