

Nude sleeveless bootneck
stretch crepe jumpsuit with
stretch wool inserts and train,
\$2,743, by Elie Saab at
eliesaab.com.



SOARING AHEAD

THOUGH FIRMLY ROOTED
IN PERIOD DRAMA,
DOWNTON ABBEY STAR
MICHELLE DOCKERY
SPREADS HER PERFORMANCE
WINGS IN THE NEW
THRILLER *NON-STOP*

By Andrew Myers | Photography by Andrew Macpherson | Styling by Micaela Erlanger

Duchesse techno cotton jacket in shocking pink, \$3,425, and Duchesse techno cotton pants in shocking pink, \$2,200, both at Lanvin, Beverly Hills; Lauren Jay diamond disc stud earrings, \$850, by Dana Rebecca Designs at Nordstrom, the Grove; black camisole, stylist's own.



Character doppelgängers are dangerous for actors. Should the public overidentify a performer with a single part, that association can quickly become as constricting as a corset, limiting casting options to the point of professional asphyxiation. The danger is greatest in breakout roles, the kind that rocket a relative unknown to fast fame and international acclaim, before the inevitable flash in the pan and one-hit wonder comparisons result in an appearance on the “Whatever happened to...?” website.

Such is an unthinkable trajectory for Michelle Dockery, aka Lady Mary Crawley, the unsinkable haughty-hottie-heroine of *Downton Abbey*. The critically acclaimed, obsessively watched British period television drama concluded its fourth season on PBS last month, and as in the past three seasons, the 32-year-old brunette beauty was the center of the action vortex, with Monday-morning-over-latte conversations often focusing on Lady Mary’s fashionable frocks and quotable quips as much as the series’ intricately embroidered plot line.

March winds blow Dockery far from the post-Edwardian Yorkshire countryside and place her 40,000

present myself, about preparation and working in an ensemble, and it’s something that carries with me to this day.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that Dockery shares her discovery of discipline through dance with acting icons Audrey Hepburn—who famously portrayed Eliza Doolittle in 1964’s *My Fair Lady*, a part Dockery would play to acclaim in a 2008 production of the stage version, *Pygmalion*, at The Old Vic in London—and Shirley MacLaine, her sometime *Downton* co-star, both of whom had rigorous backgrounds in tights and bars, pliés and jetés.

Dockery’s own dance training continued at the Finch Stage School, located “at the end of my street, literally,” she says, and which she “adored” and attended from age 5 through her A-levels at 18. It was also where she intensified her pas de deux with drama. “By 16 I knew I had more passion for acting. I never wanted to leave the drama department. I was always working on scenes or thinking up stuff to perform with friends, and I’m afraid some of my other subjects might have slightly suffered,” she says, any regret tempered by her winning the school’s

“By 16 I knew I had more passion for acting [than dance]. I never wanted to leave the drama department.”

feet in the air. Such is the setting of the action thriller *Non-Stop*, Dockery’s big-budget Hollywood debut. Co-starring alongside Liam Neeson and Julianne Moore, she plays the scrappy Nancy, a stalwart flight attendant on an imperiled plane. “It was an entirely new experience—the film, living in New York and working in a studio where they pretty much built a plane,” says Dockery, who got more than a kick working with a stunt coordinator to execute a number of action sequences. “Although not quite as many as I would have liked,” she adds playfully.

Still, it’s not a penchant for the well-placed punch that will keep Dockery professionally safe in Hollywood, her momentum onward and upward into the wild blue yonder. Rather, it’s her resolution, a character trait Dockery considers defining, and one that was instilled in her by dance. “I had dance training from a very young age, 3 or 4,” says Dockery, who grew up the youngest of three girls, all of whom were enrolled in classes by their mother, in Essex, England. “It taught me how to

drama prize and being named Actress of the Year in her graduating yearbook.

Dockery also garnered the attention and encouragement of a special, irreplaceable teacher, one who encouraged the aspiring thespian to take the next step: to apply for the National Youth Theatre. “I won a place,” she says, describing the three-week program as a great “initial starter, one that solidifies whether you want to be an actor or not.” Dockery doesn’t equivocate: “I loved it. I cried when it finished; there was nothing else I wanted,” she says. In fact, she liked it so much that she worked there as an assistant in her gap year following graduation from Finch. “I was in the office, assigning the students to their groups; it was valuable and interesting to be on the other side from where I’d been,” the actress recalls. Likely less interesting was her work that same year as a waitress and barmaid, jobs taken so that she could save money to fund her subsequent three years at the prestigious Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where

she won the institution's lauded Gold Medal for drama and made her professional debut as Jessie in *His Dark Materials* at the National Theatre.

In the several years that followed, Dockery played what she's called "more vulnerable parts" in British television movies and series such as *Hogfather* and *Dalziel and Pascoe*. Next came her turn as Eliza in *Pygmalion* ("I had an absolute love, a longing for that role," she says), followed by *The Turn of the Screw*, a TV movie based loosely on the Henry James novel in which she starred opposite Dan Stevens. That role would prove to be a predictive precursor, as Stevens would go on to play Matthew Crawley for three seasons on *Downton Abbey*, beginning as Lady Mary's nemesis and eventually becoming her true love. "My audition was early, 9AM. Brian Percival [the director of six *Downton* episodes] was in the room, as was [producer] Liz Trubridge, and it lasted a good hour," says Dockery. On the way out, she ran into Stevens. "I asked him who he was reading for, and he said Matthew, and he asked me who I was reading for, and I said Mary. I remember thinking, 'This could work.'"

But where does Dockery begin and the equally resolute Lady Mary end? "I'm asked this a lot, but I still have to think about it. Really, I'm so different from her," Dockery demurs. "I love that she's so complex. She's very modern in that sense because she's more than a strong woman: She's witty, vicious even. She doesn't suffer fools, yet she's sensitive. She's a mixed bag, and I enjoy playing those sides of her." Then, after a moment, Dockery adds, "I also love [that] she doesn't apologize for who she is or what she's done. She might confess a doubt to Anna [her trusted lady's maid] in private, but in public? Never."

While Dockery and Lady Mary might share a degree of reserve that comes from a more general shyness, as well as a coolness in many shades, a key aspect of the latter's journey is her learning to temper rigidity with flexibility so she and her world won't break apart. But this is an alloy and alchemy Dockery has long known. Focused Dockery is; rigid she is not.

From her early acting days, Dockery's creative reboot has not been in melodrama or tragedy, but in comedy—in laughter, in hijinks even (as behind-the-scenes *Downton* footage demonstrates). More recently, Dockery's comic creations include Brittany, a character she invented while in New York and trots out for friends, and who is essentially

Lady Mary's alter ego transplanted to Southern California—right down to a distinctive L.A. dialect. Then there's Officer Tough, Dockery's centerpiece on a Jon Hamm-narrated clip on the website Funny or Die, in which she spoofs a modern police detective mind-melded with Lady Mary "cameos" to perfection. Would the eldest Crawley sister ever poke fun at herself, and at her own expense?

Still, Dockery is reluctant to leave her own comfort zone in the dust. "When I'm slightly scared by a read, I know the character is for me," she says, adding that after reading *Downton Abbey's* script, she initially found the prospect of playing Lady Mary terrifying. "I'm not that person, I thought," she says. "Then I realized that fear was actually good, that it whet my appetite."

Dockery was also much less a fashion plate before meeting Lady Mary. "A few years ago, I didn't know one designer from another," she says, adding the costumes and scenery were a part of *Downton Abbey's* allure from the first episode, and because of the series' popularity, an interest in what the actors wear offscreen has carried over into her real life. Subsequently, Dockery has found fun in fashion. She wowed at the Met's Costume Institute Gala last May in a sleeveless, textured, Burberry-designed LBD, and often works with New York-based stylist Micaela Erlanger, who, when asked if she has a favorite frock donned by Dockery, can hardly contain herself: "I'd have to say the Alexandre Vauthier gown at the Golden Globes in 2013!" she exclaims, "or the custom Prada at this year's Emmys. Or the printed Peter Pilotto or Mary Katrantzou cocktail dresses..."

Among fashionistas, Dockery obviously instills the same adoration Lady Mary seems to elicit from eligible titled bachelors. "Still," Dockery contends, "while I enjoy it, I don't take it too seriously."

But even though Dockery's resolve has long been steely, steady and evidently unbreakable—because, like an airplane's wing, it's neither rigid nor overly flexible—she and Lady Mary do share one particular passion. Tired, after a long day, finally finished with a costume fitting for the fifth season of *Downton Abbey*, Dockery reiterates how much she enjoyed the new experiences associated with *Non-Stop*. "But as much as I loved it, I'm looking forward to going back to the castle," Dockery says. Her head might have been literally in the clouds, but *Downton* remains a dream come true. **A**

"When I'm slightly scared by a read, I know the character is for me."



Silk open-neck sweater, \$1,195, by Ralph Lauren Black Label at Ralph Lauren, Beverly Hills; vintage wash straight-leg jeans, \$205, by J Brand at Neiman Marcus, Beverly Hills; rings, Dockery's own.

Hair by Mara Roszak for L'Oréal Paris; Makeup by Jordan Long for Exclusive Artists Management using Tom Ford Beauty