Best of BLITZ



Jim Shelley is bewitched by Charlotte Rampling

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Charlotte Rampling first captured the public imagination over twenty years ago with her appearance in Georgy Girl. During her subsequent career she has starred in many

RAMPLING

INTERVIEW BY JIM SHELLEY

notable films, including Visconti's The Damned, Cavani's The Night Porter and Woody Allen's Stardust

Memories. A recently published book of photographs, With Compliments, pictures Rampling over the

years.

n his introduction to With Compliments, Dirk

Bogarde writes: "Rampling keeps her own sensuality well banked-down, but one is constantly aware of the fire below"

Where does the fire come from?

"I don't know. You get different things from your mother and father — I'm like a mixture of them both. My father had it. He was a very violent man but a very good man. He was an Olympic runner and fire really blows in those guys. For him not to lose control, he had to structure everybody's lives, he was so frightened of losing control. I have to tame it all the time, I don't know whether one should. I don't tame it when I'm working. That's the way I've lived because I fear the violence inside."

Can you turn it on, in the same way that you said you could turn on glamour, famousness, when you want?

"I consciously turn it off."

Don't you mean down?

"Well, yeah. Turn it down. I don't think it can be turned off. (laughs) Just turn the burner down to simmer!!!" >

DTOGRAPH BY PETER LINDBERGH FOR ITALIAN VOGUE

Rampling is dressed in yesterday's clothes ("so as not to wake the children sleeping in the next room") — a large white Japanese shirt and baggy beige culottes. Her blonde hair is short, elegantly swept, her face smothered in soft freckles and what looks like no make-up except a bright red lipstick. Her power, her strangeness, the fire lies in her sly green eyes, which dart about the room agitatedly as she talks, suddenly fixing on me and hitting me with a

shiver. When she giggles and flirts a bit and smiles widely, laughs loudly, I am aware that I am sitting next to the most gravely beautiful woman I have ever met and it is a very strange feeling. Bewitching is not a word one uses very often in a lifetime.

"What about sex?" I asked, trying not to make it sound like a request.

"It's important, yes, I was never violently promiscuous."

Do you go to extremes, emotionally, sexually?

"Oh, yeah," she says, matterof-factly.

I mean, from very low to very wild.

"Mmm, yeah," she sighs. "That's the problem, really."

And then she laughs loudly.

Bogarde is, of course, perfectly correct. One is always aware of the fire below. It is 9am in a Piccadilly hotel and Charlotte Rampling and 1 have just got out of bed. But whilst I looked wrecked, she... looks less than wrecked. Considering I arrived early and got her up, she looks astonishing. The fire, the ice frisson that sparks the air around her is already in evidence.

In his introduction to Charlotte Rampling With Compliments, a recently published collection of photographs, Bogarde writes of "the measured tread, the slender length of leg, curve of neck and throat", describing her "as free and simple and as skittish as a foal". He mentions Garbo and Bacall and Hepburn, and the photographs (by the likes of Cecil Beaton, Norman

Parkinson and Helmut Newton) back him up. Of all contemporary actresses, Rampling alone has the assurance of true glamour. She alone has the power of the icon.

As in her acting, in person she has enormous style and subtle sensuality. Her elegance is almost effortless, completely casual, as true style always is – in the purr in her voice and its crystal English accent, and the graceful slink in her walk. She has extreme poise and, for the most part, total control. 'Lithe' is the word most used of her; 'hypnotic' coming far behind. Bogarde says when she is on screen, one has to watch her. And even though she is an extremely unostentatious actress, he's right. When she is in the room one has the constant feeling of holding one's breath.

With Compliments is a beautifully lavish book of photographs, capturing Rampling at 17 as a young model, all kittenish innocence, through her wild petulance of the Sixties and films like Georgy Girl to stills from Cavani's The Night Porter, where, gaunt and drawn, she still holds the same fascinating power. She is pictured with many of the men she has worked with — Bogarde, O'Toole, Mitchum, Depardieu, Newman, Woody Allen — but the pictures of her alone are the most memorable, notably Newton's photographs of her sitting nude on a polished oak table with a wine glass, or lying, clothed, on a bed, hand poised dangerously between her legs.

"The book was the German publisher's idea. I



thought it was quite a good idea. They chose the pictures and I okayed them. I couldn't say I have a favourite. I haven't really looked at it in great detail. It's for others, not for me."

Looking at the pictures, how do you feel?

"It's almost like looking at someone else. I don't really spend time looking back. I'm always going forward. I have a very selective memory. There are certain chunks of my childhood that I just don't remember. One puts a block or filter on. I don't know what must have happened."

Do you get any feelings of missing your youth?

"No, no," she says somewhat distantly. "Because I wasn't very happy when I was younger. I was a fairly disturbed and anxious person. I still am but I think that age makes you become a bit more solid. You know that you just have to accept what you are. When you're young, you think, 'It'll change, I'll be this and I'll be that! But it doesn't change, you never change... All you can do is make things a bit easier, that's all. Otherwise things get a bit unvivable." She pauses. "Unvivable! (laughs) How awful! Franglais! Un-viv-abul (she sings in mock cockney)... All you can do, if you can get inside yourself, you can't change things but you can make things happen around you. You have to be very brave to do that, don't you? We're all very doubtful creatures mainly. Most people aren't brave enough."

There is much nervousness in the room. So I have a vodka and lime for breakfast while she smokes Gauloises, has honey in her tea and knots her fingers

as she talks. Her mood seems to switch in seconds, from classic cool composure to sudden distraction. She remains for the most part firmly confident, collected and patient. Honest but detached. Though she laughs a lot, there is something fragile, anxious, underneath. As she talks she bends a metal bottle-top in her fingers before casually ripping it into strips. So you weren't a happy child?

She answers with a sigh. "It was alright. I was a very solitary creature, I didn't really connect with people, which was why I wanted to go into acting, one of the most extroverted types of work. My father stopped me from going into cabaret. I wanted to force myself to emerge. I had a military unbringing — my father was in the Royal Artillery — so I had a rather displaced childhood. We lived in Gibraltar, Wales, Norfolk, London and then France for three years, in Fontainebleau, where I went to this convent school. My father was terribly frightened of losing control and it obviously influenced his way with the children a lot. So when I broke out, I had to break out very fast and furiously."

Did he accept that, understand that?

"No, he didn't because my mum fell ill when my sister died. She was 21. And my mother fell ill at the same time, so for about four or five years I was on my own while my father looked after her."

How did your sister die?

"She died of brain haemorrhage. Just like that. Very suddenly"

Were you ever afraid, anxious, about losing your



the EARLY YEARS (FOR TO right): in her first film role, as a waterskier in Richard Lester's The Knack (1965); in her second film, Rotten To The Core (1965); as Meredith in Georgy Girl (1966); as Elisabeth in Visconti's The Damned (1968); her most famous role, in The Night Porter (1973).

looks, your look?

"No. I had too many other problems," she says, without laughing. "You see, I never played on my looks. I didn't go into acting because of my looks, I wanted to express myself. I thought I had a funny old face which didn't really fit in with the Sixties, sort of heavy-eyed. I never thought I was particularly beautiful – that's not false modesty, I'm a very unvain person. Do I have a favourite piece of my body? Oh, no (laughs), it all seems to go quite well together."

Having broken away, she got a part in Richard Lester's *The Knack* ("a lovely film") with Michael Crawford, before landing the lead in John Boulting's *Rotten To The Core* and the part of the gorgeous, wild Meredith in *Georgy Girl*, which spun Rampling into the centre of the heady fame of the Swinging Sixties.

"I often wonder if I hadn't got that first lucky break, whether I would have had the courage to persevere, to fight and keep being put down. I was terrified of being put down. I never had to go through that. I had to struggle, yes, that's part of life. Life takes great effort... I was terrified doing Rotten To The Core. I felt guilty about having a lead role, so after that I went to the Royal Court to train. I was 20 or 21 when Georgy Girl came out. It was a very heady time, yes, After the Baby Boom after the war, there were so many young people about, getting known, in the King's Road, and all that. The success never really affected me because I never really believed it had arrived. Nothing's stable. From 16 to 21 was a very good time for me. Up until my sister died, when I wasn't too well for a while."

How much like Meredith were you? Were you that wild as a teenager?

"Oh yeah!" she says again, thrillingly matter-offactly. "But she pushed it really far. I wasn't as cruel as Meredith. I'm not a cruel person. I hate hurting people, but I can be very tough. People always take the wrong idea if you play strong roles. After Meredith, I know my image was absolutely the essence of The Bitch. For a long time, people were terrified of me. They thought I was going to be absolutely vile. It was completely the other way. I'm incapable of hurting a mouse. I mean, I've played lots of vampy, sexy women, they're great to play, but it's a hassle in life. I'm not like that. You can turn it on, yes, if you want to play the vamp, the seducer, the sexy and the slinky, but it's a game. You have to pay for the consequences, the response. It is thrilling, it's a high, but you're feeding off the attention and that really doesn't interest me. Or only when I decide to do it, at a premiere or something. You can pretend to be anything you want. There are all sorts of games." Do you terrify men, when you want to?

"Icould. I can. It's a power that a lot of women have, if they want to use it. In a bad way it can be devastating, but I like men too much. I love their company, so I couldn't bear them to be threatened by me."

She laughs. I ask what it is she likes about men and she answers almost in a whisper.

"Oh, lots of things... Lots of things... Now, I have more girlfriends, but before, all my close friends were men because women were so jealous of me and did such horrible things to me. After Fontainebleau, I went to this aveid borning private girls school terrible mistake, with cruddy brown underms, and they excluded me from everything parties dance. They'd all go to the comma and I is at these own, with them all sitting them are stopped on the me... So I got a bit pissed off with scenario. Have you chosen your men, or have they all sections.

"With the good ones, and the one I in living a line one is tremendously good. I think you choose our other. When I saw him it was like looking at me, in the male form. We both just knew."

In 1973, just as she was about to start The Night Porter, she left England for France. ("I didn't want to leave, I was violently against it, but I couldn't afford to stay.") Offered only "decorative, silly roles" in England, she turned to European directors, to get the "food" she needed. Visconti's The Damned and Cavani's Night Porter earned her her place in cinema lore, her performance in the latter as the shorn, bone-bare victim/lover of a Nazi officer in a concentration camp rewarding Dirk Bogarde's courage for insisting that she got the part in the first place.

"I was working tremendously hard, doing film after film after film and getting in a state of complete mental and physical exhaustion. It all came at the same time – leaving England, doing Night Porter and having Barnaby, who was only 3 months old when I started Night Porter. From Night Porter I went straight





taken from CHARLOTTE RAMPLING WITH COMPLIMENTS, published by Quartet, £20.00.)

on to Zardoz with Sean Connery and I was getting tireder and tireder. Every time I did a film, I used all my energy up and there was no time to recharge. My energy level was getting lower and lower. I couldn't get off the spiral. It lasted three years before I met my husband and luckily he was able to stop me, thank God, I then took a five-year period of rest, refused everything, except the Paul Newman picture (The Verdict) and the Woody Allen film (Stardust Memories). I'm not so kamikaze now. I've learned how to push a few more stop buttons."

How did you get so thin for Night Porter?

"Yes, I was terribly thin. It was purely through nerves, anxiety. Night Porter is the film that matters most to me, yes. It was difficult because it was so real. Those concentration camps were real and the people walking around in the scene naked had all been in the war... You asked me what matters most about acting, well it's that responsibility you have of portraying emotions which are true. There has to be truth. Which is why I get so 'into' my roles. The way you move, the way you think, the way you sit and do nothing. It has to be right. I really needed to put myself in those strange, difficult roles. Night Porter, I absolutely had to do that film, even though we had no money, no distribution. It was a real calling, for some reason."

Have you given much of yourself away? How far did you go for a film?

"Oh, I've been very far... Night Porter the most, probably In each part I've given very sincerely. I've chosen parts which are quite often rather neurotic and strange and difficult, people having problems with their lives, because it reflected with mine and I needed to express myself in those areas. You do think those feelings will then be exorcised, yes, and they are in a way... I often wonder if I hadn't done all those parts, if I hadn't been an actor, I would have needed to exorcise those feelings somehow without becoming lonely and, er, barmy."

Was that a possibility?

"Well yes, I did worry about that... It's a very fine line. There is an enormous amount of stress in life, as we know. Life takes great effort. It's a question of trying to keep slightly steady. It's not always easy."

Rampling still lives in France, just outside Paris (when she writes me her address, she writes 'C. Ramp' over the top), with her husband and three children, finally having found some stability. Her next project (after the release of Mascara and Oshima's Max My Love, in which she co-stars with a rather kinky ape, and which she describes as "a fabulous film" even though England has proved to be the last country in Europe to get a distribution deal) will be a David Hare film, followed by another Italian film with a new young director. She also makes a two-minute appearance in Alan Parker's superb-looking piece of nonsense, Angel Heart, due for release in October. She is still friends with Bogarde and though they would like to work together again, after Night Porter the chances of finding a project of equal substance

must be remote.

When she is not working, she says, "My most favourite thing is reading - Italian, Japanese, Russian, everything. I didn't read much as an adolescent so I take great pleasure in reading." She does yoga, exercises, walks the dogs. "I don't cook or garden much, I'm verv undomestic. I've got a lovely garden. I spasmodically plant a flower. I like to see roses growing, but I've got people to look after all that."

She says she likes Japanese fashion "at the moment", but not haute couture. "If I put on really great-looking clothes, I feel too invaded by them, even though I have the sort of body which they look fantastic on. I mean, I like being famous, I love being famous, but I desperately need anonymity as well. Otherwise I couldn't observe the world normally." Have you been happy most of the time?

"Happy? Happy is a sort of prize you get every now and then. It's like suddenly winning a red rosette. What's important is knowing that that state exists. The awful thing is when people feel they can't find it again. What makes me happy? I couldn't say. If I knew that, or if I knew what oppresses happiness, that would be like knowing the secret of life in a sense, wouldn't it? I can't say I'm immensely happy, but I'm immensely fulfilled when I'm working, using all my emotions, all ready to be given. Those moments are tremendously powerful moments for me."