

Smallholding, big dreams

Gutsy, gorgeous and a right giggle, **Charlotte Reather** catches up with actress and star of the West End, **Jodie Prenger**



Words by:
Charlotte Reather
Charlotte is a leading country lifestyle journalist, comedy writer and mother of two

I FIRST MET JODIE at the National Youth Theatre 23 years ago. We were both 17 with a passion for theatre and a creative zeal. It was one of the most brilliant three weeks of our lives and many of our year have gone onto great things, including Tom Ellis (Miranda/ Lucifer), Marc Elliot (Eastenders/ Holby City) and, of course, Jodie herself, getting her big break in 2008 on BBC1s ‘I’d Do Anything’, winning the show and landing the role of Nancy in Andrew Lloyd-Webber’s Oliver!.

Since then, Jodie, 41, has starred in Kay Mellor’s ‘Fat Friends The Musical’ with Natalie Anderson and Freddie Flintoff, taken her one-woman show ‘Shirley Valentine’ around the country and has graced the West End in the National Theatre’s production of ‘One Man, Two Guvnors’. Most recently, she starred in Shelagh Delaney’s ‘A Taste of Honey’, earning much acclaim for her performance as Helen, a tough working class single mother and alcoholic.

Meeting after the show, we reminisce about crazy thespian antics at NYT and I remind her about her Academy Award-themed four-poster bed with Oscars as bedposts. “I cannot believe you remembered that!” she says.

How could I forget?

“So embarrassing, but sadly true!”

The showbiz seed was planted at an early age. “Growing up in Blackpool, I was in the hub of entertainment – I mean my Nan was friends with Danny La Rue! I grew up in such a camp atmosphere which was very musical.”

And, although her parents Madeline and Marty didn’t tread the boards, she absorbed their work ethic running a 100-room hotel in Blackpool.

“I watched them graft long hours in the unforgiving world of hospitality (and later care homes). I suppose it was the perfect training



PHOTO: RUPERT BARKER

ground for a life in theatre.” And, indeed, running a small farm, because Jodie’s other passion, like mine, is the British countryside (and animals) and it’s in the blood.

“My father was Dutch and grew up on dairy farm in Holland. His family later emigrated to Canada, where they also ran a dairy. He grew up with dogs, hens and cows and I think sometimes he missed it.”

It’s a life Jodie has replicated on her idyllic 12-acre smallholding at Esprick (just a few miles from Blackpool), where she lives with her Lancastrian beau, Simon Booth, and a growing menagerie.

“We have three Dexter cows, two cats and two dogs called Hooper and Oskar. I found Oskar, a greyhound, dumped in a car park near the National Theatre after a rehearsal for ‘A Taste of Honey’, so I took him home on the train that night (back to Lancashire) and was late for rehearsals the next day. Sorry National Theatre!”

THE GOOD LIFE:
Jodie loves to leave the theatre world behind and get stuck in with jobs on the farm

“We’ve got 11 ducks and I’ve lost count of the number of hens! I’ve got bantams, Silkies, Frizzles, and a cockerel called Doris – named after Doris Day on the day she died. Always been a massive Doris fan, me.”

Given the number of hens (and eggs to feed a village) it’s small wonder the local farmers think she’s scrambled – but in a good way. “I was going to put solar panels on the cow shed so they could have the radio on, and my neighbour on the next door farm just shook his head in disbelief.”

I wonder what they make of the lambing barn she’s turned into a Western town clad in wood, complete with a wagon wheel and saloon doors!

What Jodie loves best about farm life is the freedom it gives her. “It’s like My Feral Lady here – one minute I’m on stage in the West End, the next I’m back home in wellingtons, elbow deep in dirt, no make-up, getting on with all the jobs that need doing.

“I remember when I was in Abigail’s Party I

was tweeting about the show while nursing an egg-bound hen called Whitney. I love the polar opposites,” she says.

When not on the farm, Jodie’s all-time favourite place to hang out isn’t the Criterion or Cannes, no, it’s Clitheroe Farmers’ Auction.

“I love it! You can get a real bargain. I remember there was a garden ornament and it was only a hundred quid and Simon was saying: ‘we don’t need it’, and I was saying: ‘but it’s only hundred quid!’ It would have been thousands new. I’ve bought chickens there and railway lanterns, benches, snow ploughs (ten for five pounds!) which I use to scoop chicken poop out – they’re absolutely wonderful. And the auction is going online too. I’ve already signed up!”

A favourite local event is the Lancashire Tractor Pulling Championships. “It’s amazing!” She can’t believe I’ve never been, so it looks like one for the diary in 2021.

Not only is Jodie a big fan of the farming scene,

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I buy British produce whenever possible and love to support our local shop, Booths

she's a big fan of farmers too. "I'm hugely supportive of them because I know how hard they work. My neighbour is already out on his tractor when I'm walking the dogs at 5am, and he won't come back in until 11 at night. That's dedication. I buy British produce whenever possible and love to support our local shop, Booths, because, if my fella finally gets on and marries me (after a nine-year engagement), it would feel like I owned the shop – because I'd be Mrs Booth!"

Her favourite British produce is gin. "There's a local distillery that makes Black Powder Gin and Sloe Port. Oh my God, it's good. If I had a bottle of sloe port and a truckful of Perl Las Welsh cheese, I would be in food heaven. Or A&E!"

An occasional forager, Jodie makes her own sloe gin from berries on the farm and is planning to make an elderberry tincture this autumn after I send her my recipe. "We go on holiday in the Lake District and stay at my friend's cottage on Lake Windermere. Everyone takes their homemade sloe gin and we have a little competition that turns into a party!"

"I think lockdown has given people an even greater appreciation of the countryside and nature and, whether we are making that connection by going for a walk or pottering in the garden, it's good for our mental health and something we should all be doing."

During the Covid crisis, Jodie has been busy growing various vegetables in her garden including cabbages, lettuce and rocket, but her main farm project is the restoration of a 16th century barn, which is partially supported by the bow of a ship.

ANIMAL MAGIC:
Cows, dogs, hens
and ducks all form
part of Jodie's
rural world



And, in case anyone thought she was slacking, she's co-writing

a TV comedy, been volunteering for Age Concern, lending her bubbly personality to lonely care home residents for a 15 minutes check-in and founded 'Vocal Home' connecting talented musicians, actors, writers and directors to aspiring creatives and children in a one-to-one mentorship scheme.

"I just really feel for my peers who are struggling or out of work at the moment. Everything's very uncertain, particularly in live theatre, so I started thinking about other ways of helping them get work."

The future for live theatre remains unclear, with indoor performances with socially-distanced audiences being allowed from 15 August at the earliest. "But it's going to be a long road and I'm worried for the future of theatre – we need to support it in whatever way we can because there's no better way, no more exciting way to tell stories, than in live theatre.

"There's an amazing synergy with the energy from the audience raising the energy of the actors to create something magical and unrepeatable."

Let's hope it's not too long before Jodie bursts onto stage strong in voice, boundless in energy, her voracious vitality recharged by life in the sticks – it will be just the (gin &) tonic we all need. 🍷

PICTURE: BBC PHOTO LIBRARY



A STAR IS BORN: Jodie got her big break when she won the role of Nancy in Andrew Lloyd-Webber's musical *Oliver!* on BBC1's talent show 'I'd Do Anything'

NO BUSINESS FOR SHOW BUSINESS?
With the backdrop of Covid-19, Jodie is desperately worried about the future for live theatre