


TV buzz

FREE WITH
THE Sun
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A photograph of Mandy Salter, a blonde woman with a mischievous expression, wearing a black top and a white corset. She is holding a lit lighter in her right hand and a bundle of red dynamite in her left. A lit firework is visible in the upper right corner against a dark blue background.

Little Miss
DYNAMITE

EastEnders' original bad girl
MANDY SALTER makes
her explosive return

Plus!
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OUTNUMBERED
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ARE BACK!**

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COVER STORY

EastEnders
Exclusive!



BACK WITH A BANG!

Watch out, Walford. A blast from the past is ready to rock Albert Square as Mandy Salter returns – 17 years after she wrote her name into soap history as one of TV's most hated characters. Is she still trouble? Hell yeah!

WORDS PAUL SIMPER PHOTOGRAPHS MARK BOND

EastEnders fans will be more than a little familiar with the name Mandy Salter. Dubbed “poisonous”, “loathsome” and “a manipulative force of nature”, she was the soap’s original holy terror; the character viewers loved to hate.

For two explosive years from 1992 to 1994, wild child Mandy ran rings around Pat Butcher, Ian Beale and Pauline Fowler; led Aidan Brosnan (played by Nineties pin-up Sean Maguire) into a life of ecstasy abuse and sleeping on the streets; and was even responsible for the death of Sharon’s beloved poodle Roly – who was hit by a truck when Mandy took him for an ill-fated walk round the Square.

Unflinchingly played without make-up or a hint of vanity by Nicola Stapleton, Mandy, in short, was dynamite. Her one and only act of goodness – talking Aidan out of jumping off a roof on Christmas Day in 1993 – had 23 million of us glued to our TVs.

Now, 17 years after she left Walford, the *EastEnders* hellraiser is back after unlikely hero Ian rescues her from a life of lap dancing and Lord knows what else. But he could end up regretting it as she wraps him round her little finger. And the rest of the Square had better bolt their doors, lock up their boyfriends and change their PINs, as money-grabbing Mandy takes no prisoners.

As South Londoner Nicola, 37, slips into a body-con dress and menacingly clutches a stick of dynamite for *TV buzz*’s exclusive

cover shoot, she’s raring to reveal all about her hugely-anticipated return. Brace yourself, Walford – there’s a storm brewing...

Here we are, 17 years on – what’s taken you so long to return to the Square?

[Laughs.] It had been discussed before, but then I was invited to watch the filming of last year’s live 25th-anniversary episode. Later on I spoke to [executive producer] Brian Kirkwood, who I’d worked with on *Hollyoaks Later*. As soon as he started telling me all these storylines he wanted to do with Mandy, I was buzzing. I always thought at some point I’d be back – I just didn’t think it’d take 17 years! Mandy is such a brilliant character – I’d never want to play the pretty girl next door. On the surface Mandy’s a bitch, but she’s had it hard. Growing up she had a life of abuse, so it gives her lots of undertones.

What was your favourite story back in the Nineties?

Dog lovers won’t like me, but Mandy killing Roly was quite funny. I am a dog lover – I have a shih-tzu named Mr Lopez after J.Lo, because he’s got a big a**e – but Mandy should never have been allowed to walk the institution that was Roly. I got a few animal-rights letters after that...

“MANDY IS SUCH A BRILLIANT CHARACTER... I LOVE PLAYING HER”



“
MANDY TOYS
WITH A YOUNGER
BOY, BUT SHE
AIN'T FUSSY!
”



kids didn't go to private school, so everyone laughed when my parents said I was going to stage school. I went to the Sylvia Young Theatre School from ages 12 to 17. By the time I was 16 I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

Who were your mates at Sylvia Young's?

I was in the same year as Keeley Hawes, Denise Van Outen, Emma Bunton and Danniella Westbrook. Me and Danniella were really naughty – we used to flick chemicals at our biology teacher to make his coat burn! She was already playing Sam Mitchell in *EastEnders* and I remember thinking: 'If I get this job, we're gonna have such a laugh.' So when I got there I already had a friend. This time I've got Tameka Empson [Kim Fox] with me – whenever I'm in a bad mood I just have to look at her and she'll make me smile.

Wasn't your first ever role in a Bond film?

Yes, I was an extra in *Octopussy*. I was around six at the time and had a couple of teeth missing, but I was in the circus scene when there's a bomb in the cannon. There were lion cubs and elephants on set – I was mesmerised by it all.

You've also worked with Charlie Sheen...

Yes, I starred alongside him in the film *Courage Mountain* in 1990. He was a lovely guy. I've worked with a few big stars and they can be quite rude, but Charlie went out of his way to make it an amazing experience for all the kids. He was an absolute gentleman.

Now you're back in *EastEnders*, how long will you stick around for?

A while – at least until sometime next year. It's great because I love playing Mandy.

And who do you think Mandy will hook up with?

She ain't fussy! Young, old, whatever – she don't care, that girl. Mandy will have a go at anything! She does toy with one of the younger boys, but I couldn't possibly say who...

Do you have a partner?

No, I'm single at the moment. But I'm always looking [grins]. I'd like a guy who has his own thing going on, not someone who just follows your career. But I'd never judge a guy by his job. That way, there's more to choose from!

Would you like to have children?

I'm quite happy for now. When I do have kids, I want to stop working. Not that I've got anything against working mothers – I take my hat off to them – but I've been working my whole life so I think that by the time I have kids, I'll deserve a few years off.

WATCH IT! EASTENDERS MON, TUES, THURS & FRI TIMES VARY BBC1

When you returned to the set, did you get that 'new girl' fear all over again?

A bit, but only for a day. I'm never nervous, though. Ever. I get excited instead. It's more positive than thinking: 'I hope everyone's going to like me!' So I was *well* ready.

What can we expect from Mandy when she returns to Albert Square?

She's incredibly guarded, but gradually she'll let her barriers down so viewers will see what's been going on in her life. Of course, because Ian finds her at a strip club, everyone will assume she's worked as a prostitute. Ian won't know what's hit him – Mandy's all knickers and water pistols! And I've got plenty of time to shake things up.

What's Mandy's style now?

She dresses very skimpily and uses her body to get what she wants. She's an overtly sexual character – very minxy and incredibly flirty.

How have you changed in the past 17 years?

I haven't changed that much, I just love what I do for a living. I know that sounds corny, but I've never done anything else. I've been a working actress for 31 years now, from the Royal Court Theatre and movies to TV shows like *Bad Girls* and *Emmerdale*. I absolutely love it.

Sounds like you have a strong work ethic. Does that help you understand why so many young people are getting into trouble today?

Young people are frustrated because there aren't many jobs and kids are living in pretty s***ty areas. But I came from a pretty s***ty area. You have to make your own destiny. There's a huge amount of pride that comes from doing a hard day's graft.

Who first encouraged you to act?

My primary-school headmaster, Mr Owen. I was in the school play and he told my parents: "She's a natural, you should enrol her in acting classes." Where I grew up, in Elephant & Castle in London,