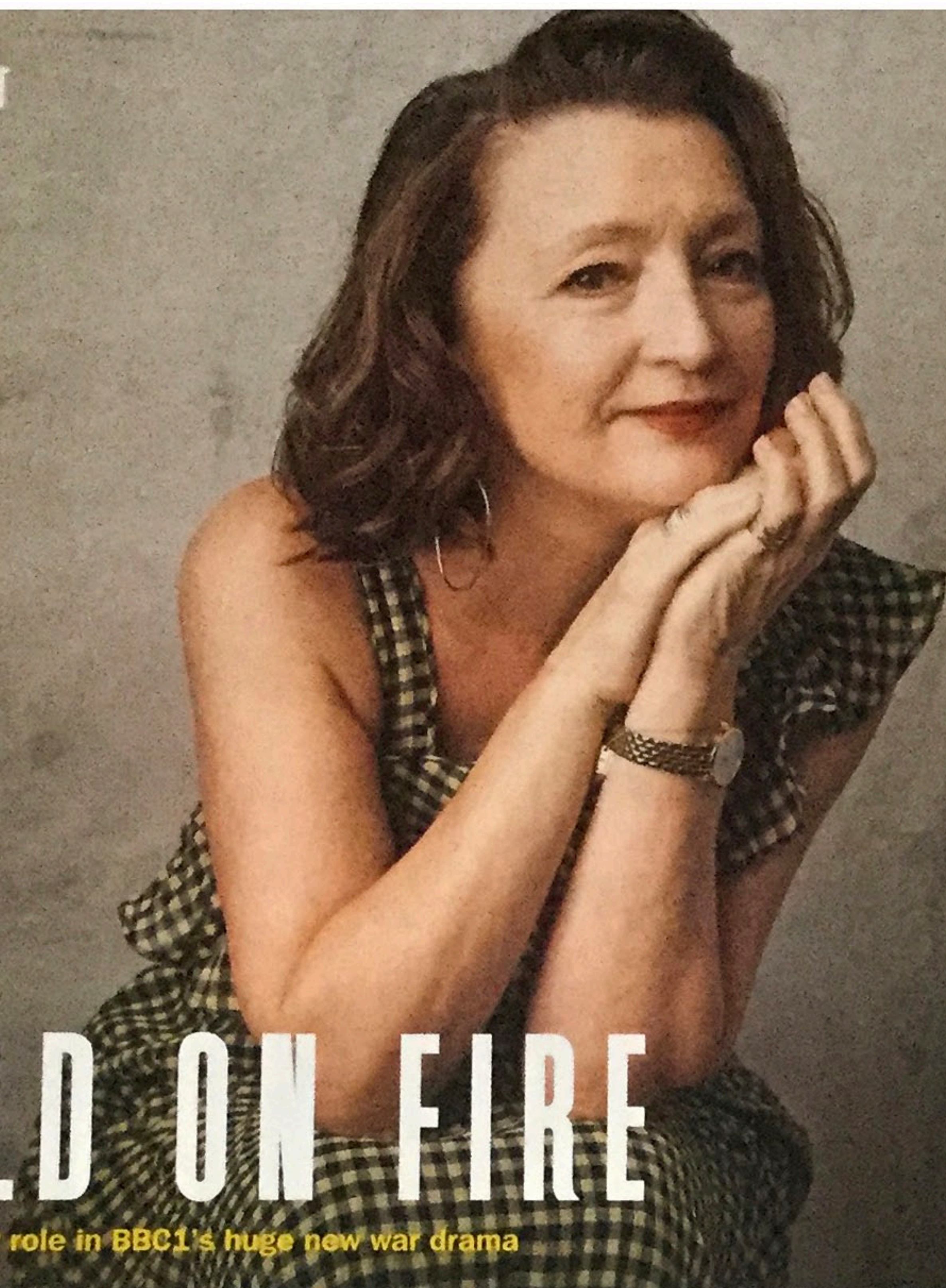


FEELING THE HEAT

WORLD ON FIRE

Lesley Manville on her role in BBC1's huge new war drama



BBC 1,
SEPTEMBER

WORLD ON FIRE is an ambitious project. It's a seven-part

World War II drama, written by Peter Bowker (*Occupation, Marvellous*), filmed in Prague, Paris, Manchester and Berlin, featuring an international cast and crew, with multiple narrative strands focusing on the lives of ordinary people in five countries. And heading up the cast, after a remarkable run appearing in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread* and three series of *Mum* on BBC2, is Lesley Manville in yet another plum role...

Had you worked with Peter Bowker before?

No, I hadn't. Obviously his reputation is well deserved. He's a wonderful writer.

He's written these great individual personal stories about experiences of the war told from all these different angles. You've got Helen Hunt playing an American war correspondent. You've got my character's son Jonah's story of being a young upper middle-class man being thrust off to Poland into war. You've got his two love affairs. You've got a gay couple in France. And you've got the Manchester story which is mine and Sean Bean's story.

What can you tell us about your character?

Robina is a very well-to-do, upper-middle-class woman living in a big house by herself. Her husband took his own life ten years before. That's a source of great shame to her. Cleverly then,

Peter has put Robina side by side with Sean Bean's character, Douglas, who's a working-class pacifist. She would have an instant set of feelings about somebody like that, not least of all because her son has got involved with his daughter. In Robina's eyes, it's just got to stop. But Robina grows to respect Douglas and admire him. I suppose in some ways that's a comment on what the war does to people.

Robina has some very choice lines that sit up and make you blink. She has a soft spot for Oswald Mosley...

Yes, the polo neck! "It's a rare man indeed who can look that handsome in a polo neck." I did have some pretty brilliant lines, I must say. You felt a responsibility



You're in the army now: Jonah Hauer-King plays Robina's son Harry.



Clockwise from main: Keeping mum: Lesley Manville plays the snobby Robina who disapproves of her son's relationship; Sean Bean as pacifist Douglas; a bicycle made for two in Nazi-occupied Poland.

to make them land properly. As the series goes on and she starts to talk about feelings, there are some pretty great scenes between Jonah [Hauer-King, who plays her son] and I as well.

We've seen a lot of WWII TV dramas but *World On Fire* seems like it's telling fresh stories.

If a series is going to be that expansive about the war you've got to take it away from just the trenches and the fighting. Otherwise you're not going to hook people in quite enough. Having said that, there are some great shocking scenes of bombings. But it's always seen through the lens of the characters in the scene. You're always seeing it from the point of view of how this huge world event affects one small person in the middle of it all. That's I suppose what will set it apart.

Having played Cathy in *Mum* was it fun to play somebody who has no maternal instincts?

Yes, of course - what a different end of the

maternal scale those two are! Likewise with Lydia Quigley who I play in *Harlots*. Absolutely ruthless and vile. It's been really lovely to do that. Of course the question is, which one am I like?

Having worked with the likes of Mike Leigh and Paula Thomas Anderson, are there any other writers or directors on your wish list?

There are always directors who you look at and think gosh, they do make amazing films I would really like to work with them. But listen, Christ almighty, I have got a list of directors that most people would kill to work for just two of them. I've worked with loads. From Mike Leigh and Paul Thomas Anderson to Marianne Elliott, Nic Hytner, Sam Mendes. You never know what wonderful character somebody might be writing for me even as we speak. We'll just have to wait and see. PAUL SIMPER

