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Goodbye Mulder, hello Ahab: Gillian Anderson talks 'Moby Dick'

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After forging one of the great female action roles on TV as (need I say it?) Agent Dana Scully in the “The X-Files,” Gillian Anderson could have become a heroine of the American multiplex. But instead, she’s become a mainstay of high-end literary adaptations, a fixture of “Masterpiece Theater.”

This week, she pops up in a lavish two-part adaptation of Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick” airing tonight and tomorrow on the premium cable network Encore. Part of a starry ensemble cast that includes Ethan Hawke as Starbuck and William Hurt as the whale-haunted Ahab, Anderson plays Elizabeth, Ahab’s wife. As Melville sticklers will point out, Elizabeth is barely mentioned in a sprawling novel that has no real female presence.

Anderson lives in London and doesn’t do a lot of interviews here -- she said the last time she did an American press junket was for the movie “The X-Files: I Want to Believe” in 2008 -- and she seemed slightly giddy sitting in a poolside cabana during the Television Critics Assn. Press Tour in Pasadena, her tiny frame clad entirely in black. Anderson spoke about her role in “Moby Dick,” and why she’s hooked on classics.

How did you get involved in this production?

I was sent the script. William was already attached and that was a big pull for me. Lately, I guess it seems like I do a lot of classics, especially now that I've just finished filming "Great Expectations." But really it's only 4. And that's not so many...

There's "Bleak House," "House of Mirth," "Moby Dick," "Great Expectations." You also played yourself in Michael Winterbottom's movie deconstruction of "Tristram Shandy." Does that count as a classic?

I don't think it does. But ... OK, so 4½ classics!

Isn't your character in "Moby Dick" barely a footnote in the original novel?

She is a footnote in the book. There is a book that's out about her ... [drifts off]. Sorry, but I just noticed that these are bedheads, I got distracted! [She points to the wall of the cabana, where there are in fact two headboards with no beds attached] Anyway, there is a book out there about what might have happened to her post-Ahab's demise. I haven't read it but Ethan [Hawke] has because he has read everything about "Moby Dick."

In this series, she is Ahab's wife and they have a child and he has gone off to sea before, where he lost his leg to this particular white whale he is going after again. His leg is made of the jaw of a whalebone which is beautifully poetic ... wait, [laughs] not the jaw of a whalebone ... you know what I mean! She can see his obsession starts to get stronger as he obsesses about taking revenge. It's quite a beautiful story about God and man and fallibility and how mortals tend to think we have godlike qualities and that we are more powerful than the forces of nature. And he finds out he's not.

When I got the job I read a good portion of the book, and one of the things I was really struck by was Ishmael, who tells the story, is constantly confounded by the fact that he can't seem to grasp the essence of the whale It has been said that it's about humans' inability to grasp God, the greater concept of God ... but that's not what you asked me! [laughs]

This is a book that means so much to so many people. Is it easier to play a character who wasn't in the original and so doesn't have any freight attached to her?

I did something called "Any Human Heart" earlier this year [a "Masterpiece Classic" miniseries adapted by William Boyd from his novel]. Many writers who have written novels and adapt them to

screenplay have to give themselves permission to forget the novel when they do the screenplay. Part of the challenge is to pull the precious bits, the juicy bits that are going to enthrall contemporary audience and make it enter-able. ... It's nice at the beginning of the miniseries to see him with his wife and child, with a tenderness that is not anywhere in the book, from what I've read.

You made your name in “The X Files,” and now science fiction and fantasy dominate television. But instead of getting stuck as a diva of science fiction, you have ended up with this very literary TV career. Was it a deliberate choice?

It's all about material to me. People to come to me with classics over there [in Britain], I've been invited into that world. I did a [the stage version] of “A Doll's House” at the Donmar Warehouse [in London] and that wasn't somebody coming to me, I stepped into that. I like to be challenged and sometimes it's the classics that are the most challenging.

Are there other projects you would like to do?

I am determined before I die to play Blanche Dubois. It's all a matter of timing and getting the right people behind it. There's a large black production of “Streetcar” that's in the works, so we have to consider how much time needs to pass between that and the next one. I hope I'm not going to age myself out of being a contender!

Another kind of classic!

I've been working for 10 years on adapting something myself: I bought a poet's first novel, “The Speed of Light” by Elizabeth Rosner. I did my first draft and then my computer got stolen. I had to start from scratch. ... I'm determined not to fail but it takes me a while to recover from the setbacks. And I intend to direct it. There are producers who are hovering, waiting for me to get my act together. But I am an actress and I get distracted.

You are playing Miss Havisham in “Great Expectations?” That is the ultimate anti-glamorous role for an actress .

She is so not glossy, believe me! When you meet her she's been in the same dress for 15 years, it's fabulous!

While you're playing all of these historical characters, what kind of TV shows do you like to watch?

I don't watch TV, I don't watch anything. The people who represent me don't like me to mention that! I can't bring myself to. I think if I were to watch anything ... I'd probably watch "Mad Men." But the couple of episodes I watched, I couldn't take the way they were treating their children. I know that's ridiculous. I saw "Precious" and I can handle that -- but there was something about how they were psychologically abusive to their children. ... I understand it on an intellectual level, I just couldn't stomach it.

-- Joy Press