

# Wilson sheds light on dark role

**THE AFFAIR STAR RETURNS AS THE CHILLING MRS COULTER IN THE FANTASY THRILLER, HIS DARK MATERIALS**

**SCARY BUT NICE**

TIFFANY BAKKER

Ruth Wilson reckons her nieces and nephews are so petrified of Mrs Coulter, the villain she plays in *His Dark Materials*, that they now hide from her.

"When they saw [the show] they were really scared of me," laughs the British actor. "The next time I saw them, they were a bit nervous, so I had to be extra nice to them."

Terrified small children notwithstanding, Wilson loves playing a baddie. (Who can forget Alice, the brilliantly unhinged serial killer – with a heart! – opposite Idris Elba in *Luther*?)

"It's always really lovely to find the shades of grey with characters and I do it with the more sort of 'good' characters I play, too," she explains. "You want to find the sort of elements of darkness or places where they are conflicted or question those good parts of themselves because I think we're all capable of going to extremes, so it's more interesting for me to find the nuance of that or find the grey rather than the black and white. I think that's where most people exist."

In *His Dark Materials*, the acclaimed HBO series based on the Philip Pullman fantasy novels, Wilson's Mrs Coulter is wonderfully nefarious and chillingly ruthless, a woman who has abandoned her daughter Lyra (Dafne Keen) but remains obsessed with her.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, James McAvoy and Andrew Scott also star.

Wilson says: "I find Mrs Coulter endlessly fascinating because Phillip [Pullman] never really gave any answers or reasons for why she acts like she does, why she has such a lust for power or why she is so obsessed with her daughter. We rarely see women leave their children, so her

psychology was so intriguing."

The show moves between multiple universes where dictators abound and power rules. And, as a tumultuous 2020 comes to a close, Wilson sees some parallels.

"There's extraordinary polarisation in society and that worries me for the future because people are becoming more extreme – left and right," she says. "And if people can't have discussions, then we're in a real difficult situation, and we're in a real problem place. If people are just knuckling down into their points of view without empathy, then what's the point in those games, they don't get anywhere if it's just violence and anger, we have to be able to discuss and we have to be able to progress and to listen to each other."

Professionally, it's been a good few years for Wilson. (We still wait with bated breath for the long-promised *Luther* spin-off starring Alice, the charming serial killer.)

But Wilson has been open about her own professional challenges as well.

For four seasons, she starred as Alison on *The Affair*, an award-winning drama about a bereaved mother whose marriage has fallen apart and who ends up in a relationship with a married man (Dominic West).

The show, which became known for its explicit sex scenes, even earned her a Golden Globe. Then, at the end of the fourth season, Alison was surprisingly killed off and Wilson was out. There was talk about a "toxic environment" and clashes with the show's creator, Sarah Treem.

For a while, Wilson kept quiet. Eventually, it emerged she had left after feeling exploited by the show's nudity, stating that her male co-star West rarely had to disrobe on screen as much as she did.

"You often do sex scenes — it's never talked about until the day of shooting," she says. "It's people's inability to talk about it and the conservatism around nudity and — certainly

in the UK and the US — about nudity and sex and intimacy, people would just prefer not to talk about it rather than deal with it," she laughs.

Seems extraordinary that there's not a discussion on set beforehand?

"Oh, never!" she exclaims.

"I was talking to someone the other day about a gay sex scene in a film and the two actors and the director — and this is recently — didn't talk about it until the day of and then of course on the day, there was big drama about what wasn't going to be seen, what people didn't want to do," she says.

She says of the film she's now shooting "there's lots of sex scenes and intimate scenes" but there's a vast difference to what she experienced on the set of *The Affair*, not least that there was an intimacy coach present.

"Again, it's about kind of allowing and enabling a conversation around the material, which wasn't there before.

It just wasn't happening, so people wouldn't talk about the scenes until they

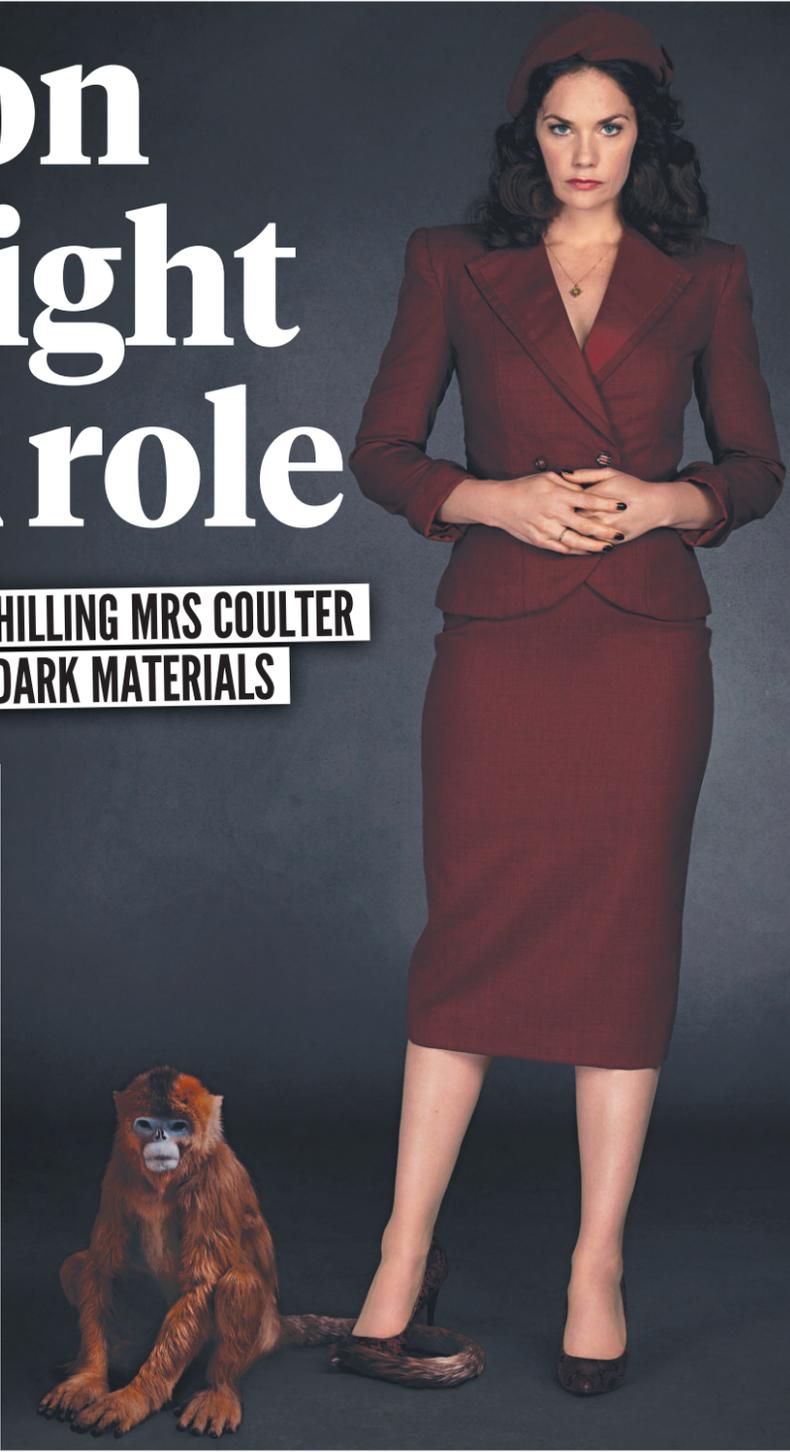
**Ruth Wilson plays Marisa Coulter in the second season of *His Dark Materials* (main and inset).**

were actually happening, and it made it very difficult if people had any insecurities or worries or concerns to air them in a public setting. Now those things are being aired and talked about and are progressing people's understanding and making the scenes a lot better and more comfortable and making better art because of it."

Wilson also says the post-*MeToo* Hollywood is already vastly better for women, although "women have to be 10 times better than men to be recognised. That's what we've always had to be". But she remains optimistic.

"I feel really positive about what's going on, there are more platforms for women, it's becoming grander and the landscape is wider and that's really exciting, but there's still work to be done. I'm really excited about what new stories we're going to see because the world is opening up to them and that's really great."

***His Dark Materials*, Season 2, Fox Showcase, 1pm Tuesday, encore 8.30pm and stream on demand**



## WATCH OUT

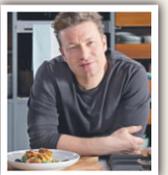
Deputy National TV Editor Lisa Woolford picks her highlights for the coming week



### JAMIE'S QUICK AND EASY MEALS

**Channel 10, Wednesday, 7.30PM**

Jamie's back with some fast and furious, and most importantly delicious cooking. You know, he whacks it in a tray, stirs it up, smashes it out — cooking with only five ingredients. There's super-fast peachy pork chops followed by a seriously stunning veg dish (peas, beans, chilli & mint) a (to go all Jamie on you) cheeky berry meringue ripple, and to top it off, the fastest, bestest roast chicken, Jamie's Harissa chicken traybake. If only he could come up with a quick way of cleaning up after.



### QUEEN OF THE WORLD

**UKTV, Wednesday, 8.30PM**

This two-part series was filmed when the Fab Four — Wills, Kate, Harry and Meghan — were still speaking, so don't tune in for any updated goss. It is, however, a lovely look at a year in the life of the Queen and the Royals as she celebrates 65 years as sovereign. There's fairly unprecedented access to the Queen inside Buckingham Palace and other Royals including the Cambridges and Sussexes — Meghan even talks about her wedding day for the first time.



### VICTORIA

**ABC, Saturday, 7.30pm**

There's no such thing as too much right royal fun in my books. There's an assassination attempt tonight. And, for *Victoria*, being shot at is nothing new. She's a veteran at that. But this time her children Vicky and Bertie are with her in the carriage during the attempt and she's more traumatised than them. When Queen Vic finds out the shooter was Irish, she decides she needs a road trip to Ireland to show the people their queen cares about them. Albert's against it, as is the PM. But the Queen says they are going, so that's that. Jenna Coleman is stunning as always.



### GRANT

**Foxtel's History Channel, Monday, 7.30pm (or stream on demand)**

If you're in a historical as well as a presidential kind of mood thanks to the crazy goings on in the US last weekend, you could do a lot worse than this excellent three-part miniseries on Ulysses S. Grant. While Honest Abe Lincoln gets most of the credit, Grant was instrumental in winning the Civil War, and went on to become the 18th president of the US, as a Republican who didn't have to be dragged kicking and screaming from the White House.

