



Lucy Boynton Thinks We Should Stop Judging Women

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Words By Annabel Brog
Photography By Rachell Smith
Styling By Leith Clark



Dress MIU MIU Ring CHANEL COCO CRUSH

Lucy Boynton – the ethereally beautiful star of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *The Politician*, *Sing Street* and two Agatha Christie adaptations – is living her dream on the **DEFINED** cover shoot, channelling a mash-up of Hitchcock heroine and Debbie Harry with hints of Victorian fright-night splendour. “My favourite literary genre is Gothic,” she tells me gleefully. “Frankenstein changed my world. Dracula, I love. I’m always, always up for Gothic.”

It’s an unexpected predilection from someone who is temperamentally both very sensitive (“I used to say I’m emotional to the point where I walk around quite skinless”) and optimistic: “I feel like everything [in life] is improvised, which creates this sense of possibility. I’m always excited and enchanted by the unknown.”

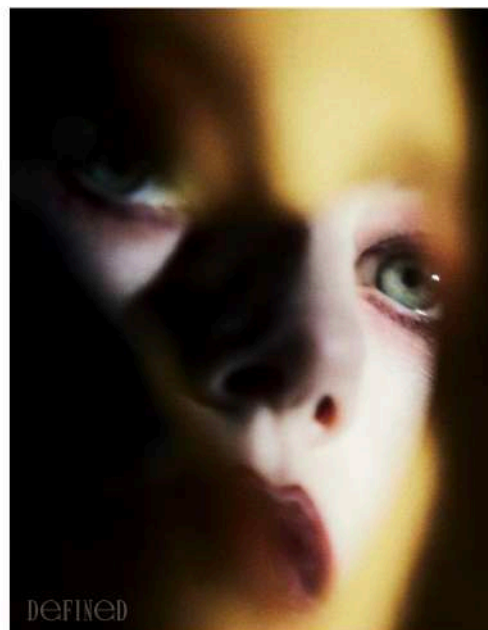
Her next role is not Gothic, nor is it hopeful. Boynton is playing Ruth Ellis, who was hanged in 1955 for shooting her lover, David Blakely, in broad daylight. The event had all the attributes necessary for pop culture canon (a blonde nightclub hostess; a rich, entitled racing-car driver; a gun) and although at the time neither the media nor the courts acknowledged the horrors Ellis endured at Blakely’s hands – how he beat and broke her, physically and emotionally, before humiliating and abandoning her – the many subsequent retellings have positioned her very much as a victim.



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A Cruel Love: The Ruth Ellis Story takes a different approach, forcing the audience to interrogate their own interpretations of empathy, accountability and victim-blaming. Yes, Blakely is unambiguously repulsive, and Ruth is shown to suffer greatly from his abuse. But the adaptation of Carol Anne Lee’s bestseller, *A Fine Day for A Hanging*, also shows Ellis to be, at times, a horrible mother and frequently callous. Mirroring Ellis’ trial and the media coverage at the time, the series does not reference the sexual and physical abuse Ellis had suffered throughout her life, including at the hands of her own father..

“Show that childhood and immediately [the audience] understand how Ruth became so hardened,” says Boynton. “[But] it wasn’t my priority to have the audience like her. More than anything I want them to acknowledge the injustice of her trial. While you are watching, you have to acknowledge that you wish she behaved differently – we want the person we are judging to be pristine so that we can empathize with them – but it is such a good exercise, to sit in dislike of someone and still know that they deserve to be treated with human decency. I had to veer away from my own instincts and my own empathy and play her as she was – someone who was never self pitying, never wanted to be seen as a victim.”



Boynton herself is a perennial good girl. "I find myself to be painfully obedient, to my perpetual regret," she admits. "My sister [Sex Taks founder Emma-Louise Boynton] was the one that walked out of the womb challenging every authority. I hated being told off, so I've been in line most of my life." Her biggest rebellion was pursuing acting as a career. "I remember having the conversation with my parents, when all of my friends were going to university and they were anxiously trying to convince me to do so as well. I surprised myself by being so adamant that I was going to [continue acting and] take this massive risk."

When we meet, the role of intimacy coordinators, and the need to respect and protect actors, physically and emotionally, on set is once again under the microscope. Boynton nearly laughs when asked if she has ever felt sidelined, or physically and emotionally vulnerable on set.

"I don't know that there is a woman in this industry who has not had that experience," she says, then pauses for a long time. "I don't know how much I want to say. I feel grateful when other actresses talk about experiences that really resonate, but the very fact that I'm hesitant to talk about it shows that it's still in play."



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"I think there is a pressure not to say anything too negative, because commenting on it is seen as complaining. And complaining isn't being a team player and it's not appealing, and as we see in these conversations about Ruth's likability, women still constantly face the expectation of having to be "appealing". I have had far more positive experiences in this industry than I have had negative, but that is directly because of the women who have come before me, who kicked "appealing" out the window and just spoke up. Who risked a lot, or everything, to speak out and make this a better industry."

The historical judgement, and silencing, of women, is one of the reasons Boynton found filming the courtroom scenes in *A Cruel Love* so difficult. "We had to play it out verbatim, for accuracy. To sit there, as a modern woman, and hear the outrageously, scientifically inaccurate descriptions of 'female hysteria' was... painful. Especially when all the men in Ruth's life were volatile, and their behavior was never described as 'hysterical'. You can understand why Ruth sat in that dock and was completely detached, completely cold. She had had 28 years of experience of how society looks at a woman like her, from her social standing, from her economic background. She knew how it would go, so she gave nothing more of herself than she absolutely needed to."



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Which brings us back to the difficulties of women working in an industry which frequently requires them to be vulnerable. Boynton feels she has been lucky with the teams she has worked with, most recently on *A Cruel Love* and the just-wrapped *See You When I See You*, where the film director Jay Duplass "created the most emotionally safe filming environment I've ever been in". But she is nonetheless a strong advocate for additional emotional safeguarding, especially when women are recreating traumatic events.

"It's not just enough to be physically safe when you're doing scenes of sexual and physical violence," says Boynton. "We prioritize [women's] physical safety by absolute necessity [but] that doesn't necessarily mean that the [wider] landscape has caught up. That's where someone like the intimacy coordinator is fucking vital."



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A Cruel Love includes harrowing assault scenes, and alongside the director, Lee Haven Jones, and cinematographer Bryan Gavigan, intimacy coordinator Sophie Cooch took the time to manage the cast and crew's emotional needs. "When we did the scene where Ruth has a miscarriage [many] people didn't know how to handle the subject matter. You can't blame them for not having the emotional equipment to deal with it, so an intimacy coordinator is the vital piece in that puzzle, the bridge, the translator that has eyes on people and knows how to take care of that situation. The very fact that so many people have a sneering attitude towards intimacy coordinators, when one is requested, speaks volumes to gender bias."

Boynton is immeasurably proud of *A Cruel Love*, but it cost her. "It took me a year to stop grinding my teeth after filming," she admits. But when asked about dreams for the future, she dives right back in. "I would love to keep coming back to women whose stories haven't been properly examined, or women we've missed," she says. "I believe there will be many."

A Cruel Love: The Ruth Ellis Story can be seen on and Britbox 17 Feb, and ITV 2 March



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