

## INDIRA VARMA

She was advised to change her 'Indian-sounding' name to appeal to global audiences. Twenty years later, she's a household name and an international star, desi moniker notwithstanding. By **Parizaad Khan Sethi**

Photographed by NICK THOMPSON

It is both pleasure and pain to know Indira Varma for the scream that was heard around the world when Oberyn Martell lost his head. Pain, because though she was the powerful fighter and feminist Ellaria Sand on *Game Of Thrones*, it's tragic that for many viewers, this is her only claim to fame. And pleasure, because ever since we heard that scream, there's been no greater joy than discovering and revelling in the rest of her excellent body of work. But Varma takes it all in her stride. "I've been in the business for over 20 years, chipping away for a very long time, and I've been privileged enough to have a variety of jobs," says the 46-year-old actor.

### TRIPLE THREAD

Varma has had, and continues to have, a prolific presence in TV, film and theatre. On TV's *Luther* (2010), she was a British lawyer separated from her detective husband played by Idris Elba. On *Patrick Melrose* (2018), starring Benedict Cumberbatch, she played a Jewish New Yorker. Come 2019, her schedule is packed by having spent the summer at The Old Vic in London's West End for a reworking of Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* (1943) and playing real-life British politician Shami Chakrabarti for *Official Secrets*. She's quick to tip her hat to her stage work. "I feel that ultimately theatre has been my best friend. Every night, you're inventing and

watching people who are a hundred times better and more experienced in doing what they do," she says. Her previous theatre credits could fill a playbill in itself—she has been directed by and performed alongside Harold Pinter and shared curtain calls with Ralph Fiennes.

2019 also sees Varma in the epic spectacle *Carnival Row*, Amazon Prime Video's steampunk-fantasy-noir series starring Orlando Bloom and Cara Delevingne. Varma plays Piety Breakspear, the steely matriarch of the ruling family, with a name that has immense frat boy humour potential. She tells me that she's never been into fantasy but is beginning to understand the appeal of that type of storytelling.

Varma explains, "*Carnival Row* discusses immigration under the guise of a thriller. The world that it's in is a human world invaded by mythological immigrant creatures who are all outsiders." She continues, "We're discussing issues people might not be interested in reading about in the papers, like immigration—maybe they're fed up or have latent prejudices. So, discussing it in an entertaining way is key."

### NOT SO COLOUR-BLIND

These parts are all varied and wonderful; many are a product of colour-blind casting, though it hasn't always been this way. Varma, the daughter of an Indian father and a Swiss mother, grew up in Bath in the UK, where she says her family were considered outsiders. As a student at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Varma's talent shone through and she was cast in school productions on merit alone. However, the real world intruded soon enough. She says, "Joining

the profession was where I encountered more limitations. People started to say I couldn't be in British historical dramas because of the colour of my skin. That's when I began being cast as the friend or the girlfriend with an Indian accent."

Varma's struggle resonates with generations of women whose talent, drive and bodies of work have been dimmed because of the colour of their skin. "In drama school, people told me to change my name to a more Anglo-European name," she recalls. Saner minds advised her to keep her name so she could be a vanguard and lead the way for those who were to come next. Today, as an incredibly visible woman in entertainment, Varma is a beacon for women of colour everywhere. >



As Ellaria Sand in *Game Of Thrones*



With Jared Harris in *Carnival Row*