

For her fellow cast members, performing with the elegant, intelligent Patricia Clarkson can be a master class in dramatic risk. "The way that she acts is almost dangerous," says Amy Adams, who starred with Clarkson in HBO's *Sharp Objects*. "She's right on the edge, and it's really fun to walk with her."

BY **GRAHAM FLASHNER**

WALKING THE EDGE

Of all the disturbing moments in the HBO limited series *Sharp Objects* — and there are many — perhaps none sums up the show's dark appeal like the bathtub scene in the finale, where Adora Crellin (Patricia Clarkson) gently washes the back of her ailing daughter, Camille Preaker (Amy Adams).

On the surface, it plays as a rare loving moment between a mother and grown daughter who have long had a troubled relationship. The reality is that Adora's glamorous exterior masks an emotionally damaged woman who suffers from Munchausen syndrome by proxy. She's poisoned Camille, and the twisted part is, Camille knows it. It's only by being sick and dependent on Adora's care that she can bask in her mother's love. Clarkson's soothing tones and tender gestures underscore the scene's creepiness.

Months later, she recalls the scene as something like an out-of-body experience. "I don't remember a lot of it," she confesses. "It was such a tormented scene.... It came together in a way that, the less thought-out, the better."

Clarkson is perched on a velvet loveseat in a suite at one of her favorite L.A. haunts, the venerable Chateau Marmont. Nestled in the hills above Sunset Boulevard, the storied hideaway exudes old-world Hollywood charm and sophistication — much like Clarkson herself. "I've stayed in every room in the place," she declares with her trademark throaty laugh.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ELISABETH CAREN**

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WITH THE GRUELING FIVE-MONTH SHOOT OF *SHARP OBJECTS* WELL BEHIND HER, CLARKSON HAS REASON TO SMILE. HAVING STARRED IN SUCH FILMS AS *THE STATION AGENT* AND *PIECES OF APRIL* — AND WON TWO EMMYS FOR HBO'S *SIX FEET UNDER* — SHE'S STILL ASCENDING IN A STELLAR CAREER THAT HAS SPANNED THREE DECADES. SHE WON A GOLDEN GLOBE FOR HER WORK IN *SHARP OBJECTS* AND COULD BE A SERIOUS EMMY CONTENDER. *PEOPLE* CALLED HER TURN AS ADORA "THE TV PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR," AND *TIME* SINGLED HER OUT IN ITS LIST OF "2018'S TV MVPS."

The accolades are especially gratifying for Clarkson, who considers Adora one of her most taxing roles ever. "I knew what I was getting into; that's what maybe saved me," she says. "The past was not prologue with this character. I had to come to her as though everything is winning and good: I have a beautiful life, a beautiful house, a perfect daughter, a handsome husband and I'm a very good person in the community." And, she says with a mischievous smile, "I look pretty good."

Adapted from Gillian Flynn's (*Gone Girl*) debut novel, *Sharp Objects* was HBO's can't-miss event of last summer. Created and cowritten by Marti Noxon (*Dietland*), the eight-episode series was directed entirely by Jean-Marc Vallée (*Big Little Lies*, *Dallas Buyers Club*).

Star Amy Adams, who served as an executive producer of *Sharp Objects*, knew exactly whom she wanted for Adora the first time she read the pilot. "There's something about Patricia, as if from a bygone era; she's a real dame," Adams says. "She has that magnetic personality that pulls you in — I thought if she could apply that to Adora, it'd be darkly seductive."

After reading the first three scripts, Clarkson's first instinct was to read the book, but both the author and Vallée dissuaded her. "They said, 'You'll only know Adora from this incarnation,'" Clarkson recalls. When Vallée shared a vision he'd had of Adora dancing through her house, Clarkson was smitten. "A man after my own heart," she thought. Vallée did not disappoint: in fleshing out the character, he gave Adora a backstory as a ballroom dancer. The scenes in which she twirls with husband Alan (Henry Czerny) offer a delightful respite from the otherwise grim story.

"Patricia is such a free spirit, so devoted to her art," Vallée says. "Everything's for serving the part. At the same time, there's a beautiful, intellectual thought behind her choices." Upon hearing Vallée's name, Clarkson gives a wry smile and slips into a dead-on French accent. "He was very unpredictable, very spontaneous, very... French," she reports. "There was no rehearsing with Jean — you show up, say your lines, he lets you go."

In the series, Adora is a wealthy Southern matriarch who presides over the small town of Wind Gap, Missouri. But her world is rocked when her estranged eldest daughter, Camille, a St. Louis-based reporter, returns home to investigate the disappearance of two young girls. Camille has just left a psychiatric hospital — she's an alcoholic who engages in cutting — and her own struggles run parallel to her investigation.

Still haunted by the childhood death of her younger sister Marian, Camille receives a chilly reception from her mother — who's less than thrilled that she's poking around in the town's affairs. Camille will soon come to suspect Adora of having killed not only Marian, but also the two missing girls, who soon turn up dead.

The mystery at the heart of *Sharp Objects* unfolds like a slow burn, with a shocking reveal in the final moment. But while Camille's quest for truth is

immersive, it's Adora — by turns charming Southern belle, controlling mother and cunning manipulator — who commands our attention. "She knows how to orchestrate — Dudamel has nothing on her," Clarkson quips, referring to the music director of the L.A. Philharmonic.

Clarkson brings deep shades of complexity and humanity to a character who could easily have veered into caricature. A New Orleans native, she drew on her Smith-educated grandmother to create the "good" Adora. "She was brilliant, she could converse on any subject, she was one of the most remarkable people I knew," the actress says. "The best parts of Adora are my grandmother — the elegance, the Southern-ness, the graciousness mixed with intelligence."

The flip side of Adora's razor-sharp intelligence is her mental illness. While much has been said about how the series shines a light on female rage, Clarkson sees Adora more as a victim of a dysfunctional upbringing. "This is a woman who was deeply abused as a child. It's generational, cyclical abuse that's just never ending," she says. "People see her as villainous, but they forget she has a monumental disease. With Munchausen, it's disabling a child to be under your power, of making the child unable to function on their own... it's a parasitic relationship."

Clarkson added physical touches like fake nails — "I thought she would have these perfect hands that were precious to her" — and an impressive collection of peignoirs. "I saw her wearing nightgowns. It just came to me."

"The way that she acts is almost dangerous," Adams says admiringly. "She's right on the edge, and it's really fun to walk that edge with her."

Having played Blanche DuBois onstage in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Clarkson knows how consumed an actor can be by a character. "You never recover from playing Blanche," she once said, and inhabiting Adora was equally unsettling. For the first time in her career, Clarkson says, "I never traveled home to New York [while playing] Adora. There was such a darkness I was living with, it was disturbing. To live with that for five solid months took a toll."

"Patricia always joked that we drank fake alcohol on set and then went home and drank real alcohol with each other," Adams says. "We would decompress, get back in each other's good graces and remember who the other person was."

Once the series aired, Adora brought Clarkson an unaccustomed celebrity. "Everyone from the age of fifteen to ninety feels they know her," she says. "The reaction to her has been something I've never experienced. And," she adds, "I know at least two people who dressed as Adora for Halloween!"

To this day, Clarkson remains fiercely protective of Adora — almost as if she's reassuring herself that the character she spent so much time in was not the murderer others made her out to be. "We have to love our characters, we have to know them and want to be them, no matter what they do," she says.

Clarkson refuses to speculate on whether Adora killed Marian — "That

stays with me," she says with a faraway smile — but her director has no such illusions. "Of course, she did it," Vallée affirms. "But she doesn't think it was her fault. That fits the disease of Munchausen — she's a good mother in her mind, and she wants to care. There's no way it's her fault if she overcares."

Acting has been Clarkson's overriding passion ever since she caught the bug in the eighth grade. "I can't live without it," she confesses. "I have a deep, deep desire to act, and it's never waned." She grew up in a secure middle-class home. Her mother was a power player in New Orleans politics, and her father was a school administrator. Clarkson is the youngest of five sisters, "all of whom have real jobs," she says, laughing.

After graduating from the Yale School of Drama, Clarkson worked on the New York stage. She landed her first big break when she replaced Julie Hagerty on Broadway in *The House of Blue Leaves*, in which she costarred with Swoosie Kurtz, Stockard Channing and John Mahoney.

She made her film debut in *The Untouchables* (1987) as the wife of Kevin Costner's Eliot Ness; Brian De Palma liked her deep voice. There was a year on ABC's *Murder One* — "the wife part," she says dryly, "a lot of chopping vegetables" — and small roles in films like *Jumanji* and *Everybody's*

role as Jane Davis, whom she describes as "an operative, the smartest girl in the room — a kick-ass character who walks softly and carries a really big purse." But she doesn't shy away from comedy: she guested on two episodes of NBC's *Parks and Recreation*. And she memorably appeared in *Motherlover*, a digital short for *Saturday Night Live*, in which she and Susan Sarandon play the mothers of Justin Timberlake and Andy Samberg.

Initially, Clarkson recalls, "Hollywood saw me as wifey-poo, then slowly people started to see that I'm darker, sexual, more feline. It's what you dream of — being seen in a whole new way." Clarkson notes that she spent half a year on Broadway and West End stages in 2014 and 2015 "getting naked every night" with Bradley Cooper in *The Elephant Man*, for which she was nominated for a Tony. "Now," she cracks, "people want me to be naked. I'm like, they couldn't have asked for this twenty years ago?"

For years, the actress has lived happily alone in Manhattan's West Village; she's previously stated that she has no interest in marriage or children. "I'm probably closer to a murderer than a mother," she says with a wicked laugh. Turning reflective, she adds, "I'm more of a solitary person than people realize. I was able to own it early on. I realized: don't fight it — join it. Don't try



All-American before she broke through with a transformative role in Lisa Cholodenko's provocative 1998 film, *High Art*.

Playing Greta, a German lesbian who's addicted to both heroin and her photographer girlfriend (Ally Sheedy), Clarkson revealed new facets of herself. "Lisa changed my life," she says. "I'd played all these suburban moms.... I'm not German, I've never done drugs and I'm sadly not a lesbian, but there was something in me that was Greta. Lisa saw the darker side of me that I was not able to expose."

High Art led to five seasons on HBO's *Six Feet Under*, where Clarkson's portrayal of free-spirited Aunt Sarah won her Emmys in 2002 and 2006 as Outstanding Guest Actress in a Drama Series. She nabbed a supporting-actress Oscar nomination for the 2003 film *Pieces of April*, in which she played a sharp-tongued mother dying of breast cancer. Her many other film credits include *Learning to Drive*, *Friends with Benefits* and *The Maze Runner*, to name just a few.

In seasons five and six of Netflix's *House of Cards*, she had a recurring

to live a concept of what you think you should be."

Not that she's never considered tying the knot. "I've been engaged," she says, smiling. "Let's leave it at that."

What she won't leave, of course, is acting. Especially roles that challenge in those new ways, like the tough-talking homicide detective Mike Hoolihan, whom she played in the recent metaphysical thriller, *Out of Blue*. She wears a Joan Jett haircut in the film, which also stars James Caan. That's the gig she went into straight from Adora. "I had to shift my whole DNA and body," Clarkson says.

Ultimately, that's the kind of challenge she thrives on. "I just want a part that's going to surprise me; that's all we want as actors. We want parts we're not quite sure we can do — to take on a character, enter a world and do things you never thought you were capable of." ©

Sharp Objects is available on HBO Go and HBO Now. The entire series will air as a marathon on June 8 on HBO2.