

TV MAGAZINE

FREE EVERY SATURDAY IN Sun 8-14 DECEMBER 2012



DERMOT O'LEARY:
MY BROMANCE WITH
GARY BARLOW
IS **SARAH MILLIGAN**
THE FUNNIEST
WOMAN IN BRITAIN?

SECRETS AND LIES

JO JOYNER AND JAKE WOOD ON THE REVELATION THAT WILL WRECK ANOTHER CHRISTMAS IN **EASTENDERS**

YOUR ULTIMATE FESTIVE GIFT GUIDE

NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Max and Tanya are all set for a festive wedding. But Jo Joyner and Jake Wood have got previous when it comes to playing Christmas killjoys...

WORDS PAUL SIMPER PHOTOGRAPHS NEALE HAYNES

On Christmas Day five years ago, 14 million viewers were glued to one of the most jaw-dropping festive *EastEnders* episodes ever. All hell broke loose in unforgettable fashion as damning footage of Max Branning cheating on his wife Tanya with his daughter-in-law, Stacey, tore their unsuspecting family apart before they'd even had time to crack open the Baileys.

Now, with that fateful time of year for soaps once again upon us, Jo Joyner (Tanya) and Jake Wood (Max) are rubbing their hands together gleefully at the prospect of more festive mayhem – as a massive, yet-to-be-revealed wrongdoing from Max's recent past comes back to haunt him the night before his second wedding to Tanya on Christmas Eve.

"I got very excited when I read the scripts," beams Jake, 40. "We only got them the day before we started filming, so our reaction was: 'S****!' laughs Jo, 34. "But luckily, good writing is always easy to learn – which is a bloody good job." "It really feels like classic *EastEnders*," enthuses Jake.

"We only filmed it recently, but aside from us and some of the other Brannings, none of the cast had known what Max's secret was. When they heard it, they were all shocked. If it can even surprise the people at work, I reckon viewers at home are in for a real treat." Both Jo and Jake still vividly recall the impact that Branning Christmas video had on the nation. Indeed, it's become one of the most memorable moments of both actors' seven years in the soap. "An *EastEnders* Christmas has become a part of British life," says Jake. "It's like the Queen's Speech," smiles Jo. "And that episode was one of my proudest times on the show. I remember doing the shot where Tanya finally closes the door on Max and I turned round, hugged Abi [Lorna Fitzgerald] and Lauren [who was then played by Madeline Duggan], and said sorry to them. That wasn't in the script – I was in the moment and they'd both done a great job. That was a good Christmas."

Of course, in the end, Tanya did forgive Max for the affair – well, after burying him alive. So this Christmas, we wonder, is there anything he could possibly do that she wouldn't forgive him for? "It doesn't look like it, does it?" smiles Jo. "I don't know what else



JO WEARS DRESS FROM ASOS; EARRINGS & BANGLE FROM FREEDOM AT TOPSHOP

JAKE WEARS SUIT, SHIRT & TIE FROM MOSS BROS

there is after going with your son's teenage bride on their wedding day." "Come on, Stacey came on to him!" grins Jake. "We'll talk about forgiveness in the New Year, shall we?" teases Jo.

Like most of us, Jake will watch the Christmas mayhem unfold with his wife of 11 years, Alison – but probably not his two children, Amber, seven, and Buster, four.

"I don't think my kids have seen an episode yet. Although they've been to visit Daddy on set, so they've got an idea of what I do."

"I won't be able to watch it because the kids are too little and there may just be some shouting and tears," says Jo, who has three-year-old twins, son Freddie and daughter Edie, with her actor husband Neil Madden. "The twins came down when we filmed the live episode with the Olympic torch. They were actually in it as extras. But me being an actress is all a bit confusing for them. The other night, Fred was trying to pull his eyelashes off in bed! He always sees me taking my false ones off when I get home. I had to say: 'Mummy only takes off her pretend work ones.'"

Throughout our interview, Jo and Jake are constantly taking the mick out of each other, in a way that only two very close friends can. But that's the secret behind the relationship that won them the Best Onscreen Partnership gong at this year's British Soap Awards.

As they picked up the trophy, Jake mischievously said with a straight face: "I honestly feel I deserve this after working with Jo Joyner. I'm close to being a saint."

"They cut the sound on my reply to that on the telly," laughs Jo. "But seriously, it has been the hardest part of the job working with him..." "She used to be very funny," says Jake. "Long time ago now."

It's somewhat surprising, given the pair's incredible success as a screen couple, that they were complete strangers before they



Bad Santa: that Christmas Day episode, 2007

COVER STORY

joined *EastEnders* back in 2006, when the Branning family were brought in as the brainchild of the show's script supremo Simon Ashdown.

PERFECT CHEMISTRY

"We met at the audition, didn't we?" asks Jo. "At your audition," says Jake. "I'd already been cast. I thought you'd just wandered in off the street. They were looking for a wife for Max." "Just 'a wife,'" grins Jo. "I went into The Queen Vic and there was Jake and Simon. They were trying to intimidate me. Didn't work. And another girl was up for the part." Her eyes dart towards Jake. "He said the other girl was much better."

"The other girl was very good," says Jake, with a glint in his eye. "I keep reminding Jo of that." "Much nicer, less sarcastic – and slimmer, apparently!" hoots Jo.

Between all the joshing, they both admit something clicked. So much so, that when either takes a break from the show – Jake has previously gone on paternity leave and Jo had time off for the birth of her twins – life on set isn't quite the same.

"I miss him when he's not there," says Jo. "You couldn't do a job like this if you didn't like the person you work so closely with. We respect each other and he's very good when I get narky, which I do once a month."

"Do you miss me when I'm gone?" asks Jo. "Of course," says Jake. "I'm a great admirer of Jo's work and I know she's a huge admirer of mine. *EastEnders* is about double acts and we got incredibly lucky when we were paired up. I don't think we'd still be here seven years later if we didn't have that spark."

Jo gives him a wry look: "Or if you'd chosen that other girl."

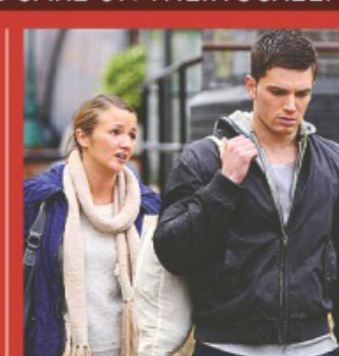
WATCH IT! *EastEnders* Mon, Tues, Thurs & Fri Times vary BBC1

161 THE NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY THE BBC AFTER MAX WAS BURIED ALIVE BY TANYA

ALL BRANNING JO AND JAKE ON THEIR SCREEN FAMILY



JACQUELINE JOSSA (LAUREN) AND LORNA FITZGERALD (ABI)
Jo: "They're both lovely to work with. They're fantastic actresses."
Jake: "Lorna winning a 2012 British Soap Award was the proudest moment of that night for me. I'm very fond of her. She's so grounded and down to earth."



DAVID WITTS (JOEY)
Jake: "He's a very good-looking boy. Scott Maslen [Jack] is probably very pleased he's no longer soap's Sexiest Male. He used to mean about that."
Jo: "Scott will always be Sexiest Male in my eyes. But David has such great chemistry with Jacqueline. They're brilliant."



ANN MITCHELL (CORA CROSS)
Jo: "Ann has a great body of work behind her and she's a great character – a force of nature. The dynamic between Tanya and Cora has added something."
Jake: "I want Cora to end up being a sort of Mafioso boss with Derek running a backhanded scheme, all on the quiet."



JAMIE FOREMAN (DEREK)
Jo: "I love him. He's been brilliant as Derek. For such a sinister character, Jamie brings so much light relief to it. He can't help but be funny with it."
Jake: "Jamie's a really lovely guy. There's a date in the diary to give him his big send-off..."



Jake and his wife of 11 years, Alison



Jo and Neil with their twins Edie and Freddie, three