

Interview

## Phoebe Dynevor: 'Bridgerton's come at a moment when people need it'

[Claire Armitstead](#)



Phoebe Dynevor photographed in Cheshire in January 2021 by Phil Fisk for the Observer.

**The actor on hitting her stride as the spirited star of the Regency romp. Still, she says, she can't let her grandparents see her steamiest scenes...**

**I**t was the gift you never knew you needed, and might even have spurned if you had

been offered it in advance: an eight-part Regency romance, set in a candy-coloured England where the wisteria forever blooms around the colonnades of pretty much every stately home you've ever seen on film.

But it's estimated that [63 million viewers around the world](#) will have tuned into *Bridgerton* in its first four weeks on Netflix – and it is a success owing, in no little part, to the on-off love affair between a brooding duke and the pearl of the season's debutantes. In its on phases, this is so steamy and intimate that you'd do well to have one of the series's many feathered fans to hand.

For Phoebe Dynevor, who plays Daphne *Bridgerton* to Regé-Jean Page's heart-stopping Duke of Hastings, it has meant keeping a quick hand on the fast-forward at her family home in Altrincham, near Manchester, where she retreated when lockdown came into force just a month after the end of filming. "I'm happy for Mum and Dad to see it, because they know the industry, and they know how hard I worked, and how much it meant to me getting that role. But not my grandparents," she says. "And with my younger brother... well, it's awkward."

It's a dilemma that might have confronted the very family-oriented Bridgertons themselves, had the dowager and her eight offspring found themselves confined to their mansion in the TV era – except that in their male-dominated household, the spirited Daphne would probably have had to punch her brother in the face to get the remote control off him. She certainly has form with her fists.

Whimsical though it may seem, this sort of sideways thought is invited by a series that filters history through the consciousness of the #MeToo era, making merry with the glamorous superficialities of Regency society – the gorgeous frocks and the fabulous interiors – while sneaking [Ariana Grande](#) into its dance music and pooh-poohing many of its inhibitions. Masturbation, for instance, which is prescribed to the innocent young beauty by her suitor as an antidote to her pre-marital ignorance and frustration.

The resulting solo scene was far harder to do than the carefully plotted sexual encounters, Dynevor points out. “We would rehearse the sex scenes like stunts. I would literally know exactly where a guy was going to put his hand at what moment. And we’d have props, like mats, that went in between us. It was more intricately choreographed than our dance routines in a way, so I never really felt exposed at all.”

Much of the eroticism is generated through closeups of the lovers’ faces, on the dancefloor as much as between the sheets. Dynevor has a lovely way of holding intense emotions – whether happy or sad – between her eyebrows. When I mention this, she giggles and says she’s seen Tweets saying that she acted very well with her neck – “though I have no idea what that means”.

Based on the bestselling romances of American novelist [Julia Quinn](#), and written by American scriptwriters, *Bridgerton* tips the wink at tropes familiar to every Jane Austen fan: in particular the social climbing wheezes of genteel families with more daughters than money or sense. But it also depicts a society of pride without prejudice, in an alternative history where race is no barrier, with the happy result that people of all ethnicities can see their own reflections in it.

Though this may seem queasily apolitical in the age of Black Lives Matter, when statues of just such titled folk as the duke are being toppled all over the land, it does have its own “what if” logic. There have always been rumours that Queen Charlotte, wife of “mad king George”, [might have had African blood](#), Dynevor points out. Had that bloodline been acknowledged, then the rigid rules of “the ton” (as high society was known) would have forced lesser white folk to kowtow to non-white pedigree.

But it would be a mistake to take it all too seriously. For the 25-year-old actor it offered a peach of a part after a period of uncertainty as to where her career was heading. Born into TV aristocracy – her mother, Sally, plays Sally Metcalfe in *Coronation Street*, while her father, Tim (himself the son of a director and an actor), has written more than 300 episodes of *Emmerdale* – she knew from a young age that she wanted to act.

At 11 she pestered her parents into allowing her to go along to open auditions for *The Golden Compass* (the first, ill-starred attempt to film Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials trilogy). “I didn’t end up getting the role, but I had the best day of my life, and from then on, it was like, ‘Right, what’s next? How are we doing this?’ My mum and dad couldn’t stop me.”



Unlike many child actors, she didn't go to stage school and did not even get a chance to act for most of her time at secondary school – “I think it was because I wasn't really a huge singer or dancer”. But at 14 she landed her first TV part as a posh new arrival in the comprehensive school series *Waterloo Road*, which meant juggling normal lessons with on-set tutoring. Back in the sixth form at Cheadle Hulme school (where her

younger sister now is), she was given a break as Antigone, in a production directed by her English teacher. “It was just the best moment ever. At 17, I was finally in a school play,” she says.

“It's only the last two years that I think I've grown up and seen my own self-worth, which is really sad”

After a gap year travelling, she hadn't even had time to apply for drama school before the TV parts started to roll in. She played a gangster's daughter in *Prisoners' Wives* before moving into period dramas with Peter Moffat's Derbyshire-set period series *The Village*, followed by the Dumas adaptation *The Musketeers* and the Dickens smorgasbord *Dickensian*. But by the time she was cast in *Snatch*, a 2017 crime comedy series based on the 2000 Guy Ritchie film of the same name, she was restless and reflected her frustrations back on herself, telling interviewers that she had never been considered very bright at school, when in fact she left with three perfectly good A-levels.

There's no such diffidence in the poised and thoughtful young woman I meet on Zoom, who started work on two scripts of her own during lockdown and would love at some point to branch out into writing and directing. “Oh, gosh, yeah,” she says, when I point this out. “I had a really strange period in my early 20s with the industry, and not succeeding the way I wanted to, and I put a lot of pressure on myself. It's only the last two years that I think I've grown up and seen my own self-worth, which is really sad.

This creates another pleasing bit of symmetry with *Bridgerton*, a series featuring a spirited young woman coming of age and finding her true self. Daphne is clear that her vocation is to become a wife and mother, an ambition that is counterposed with a younger sister's determination to do nothing of the sort. “If she was born in this era, I don't think she'd be so bothered about marrying,” reflects Dynevor. “But what immediately excited me about the script was that, even within the context of this time, these women have real agency. They're obviously all suffering from the patriarchy in their own ways, but they manage to choose their own destiny.”

It also foregrounds female desire, not only as a central theme but as the vantage point from which that theme is seen and explored. She cites a scene where the duke undresses for bed revealing his naked bottom as Daphne looks on. “So many times I've seen that done where it's the man laying back in bed, with his chubby belly, and



the woman is absolutely gorgeous in every way, and you see all of her beautiful backside. To flip that on its head was so interesting to me.”

For all that the bare-bum scene has become a bit of a staple of revisionist period drama (even Austen’s Knightley bared his in [Autumn de Wilde’s recent film of \*Emma\*](#)), it’s very easy to lie back and enjoy it at a time when pleasure is so hard to come by. Timing, Dynevor agrees, is what has pushed *Bridgerton* so far beyond the usual fanbase of period romances. “It has come out at a moment when people need it. It’s distracting and fun – a nice little bit of respite from the world we’re having to endure at the moment.”

As for her off-screen relationship with her co-star Page. “It was a big moment in both of our lives in a lot of ways, and we were both quite nervous about it. We spent so much time rehearsing together that we’ve become good mates,” she says. “Unfortunately now he’s off in Los Angeles, but we check in with each other a lot.” Many’s the heart that will already be pining for an on-screen reunion.