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Not long ago, she was a virtual unknown outside her native Canada. Now **Tatiana Maslany** is an awards contender with fans worldwide raving about her multiple roles in BBC America's *Orphan Black*.

# WELCOME TO HER WORLDS

BY **MIKE FLAHERTY**

## ON A LATE-WINTER'S DAY IN TORONTO'S SPRAWLING CINEVILLAGE,

the cast and crew of BBC America's sci-fi smash *Orphan Black* are just days away from wrapping season two — a couple of those days being makeups for time lost when Tatiana Maslany had to fly to L.A. for the Golden Globes, where she was nominated for best performance by an actress in a drama series.

That's what's known in the business as a luxury problem. It's also just the most recent plaudit for a star and a series that have been awash in them since the show's debut last March.

Last summer Maslany won a prestigious individual achievement award from the Television Critics Association, and while she didn't prevail at the Globes, in her case it truly was an honor just to be nominated. After all, not that long ago Maslany was a virtual unknown outside her native Canada, and historically science fiction has struggled to be recognized by the industry's most prestigious awards.

But in its first ten-episode season, *Orphan Black* became a breakout hit for BBC America and soon was airing in the U.K. on BBC Three. In February its distributor, BBC Worldwide, sold broadcast rights to the show in several European and Latin American countries as well as Australia, New Zealand and Korea. It also became a go-to show for Space, its Canadian broadcaster.

Now, as *Orphan Black* approaches its second-season U.S. debut — April 19 on BBC America — it is more than clear that it has joined those relative few sci-fi series — *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost* — that have aroused significant interest outside genre enthusiasts. Like those shows, *Orphan Black* presents a juicy premise — a young woman caught in a curious conspiracy — but ultimately deals with issues outside its literal plot purview, including the very nature of personal identity.

In the series' unforgettable opening scene, Sarah, a drifter and con artist, sees a woman who looks just like her on a train platform — and seconds later watches that woman leap to her death in front of an arriving train. The suicide victim, a Toronto detective named Beth, has left her wallet behind, and Sarah steals it and assumes her identity. Eventually — and to her horror — Sarah discovers that she and Beth are two of a seemingly ever-expanding cohort of clones being monitored and exploited in a diabolical nature-versus-nurture experiment... or maybe something worse.


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“I KNOW THE  
PHYSICALITY.  
IT’S IN MY BODY  
NOW — IT’S NOT  
SOMETHING I’M  
TRYING TO FIT  
INTO ANYMORE.”

TOP AND PANTS BY **SASS & BIDE** AVAILABLE  
AT RAC BOUTIQUE; NECKLACE BY **IOSELLIANI**;  
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Intriguing, for sure. But *Orphan Black* may be the greatest MacGuffin in TV history, as the most compelling element is Maslany herself, who in a tour-de-force of versatility and nuance, plays Sarah and Beth as well as: Katja, a mysterious German assassinated in front of Sarah's eyes; Cosima, a sexy-geeky PhD candidate in evolutionary biology; Alison, a deliriously mad suburban housewife; Helena, a feral, fright-wigged Russian avenger whose attempts to fight the clone-masters cost her her life; and Rachel, a haughty corporate executive who appears to know a little too much about the abduction of Sarah's daughter, Kira.

And that's just so far.

No wonder, then, when asked how she's doing, Maslany replies: "Pretty exhausted."

As if hesitant to get too comfortable, she's perched on the edge of a sofa on one of the show's signature sets: the disabused warehouse-turned-garret home of Sarah's louche, acerbic foster brother and confidant, Felix (Jordan Gavaris).

That said, she's quick to differentiate sophomore-season fatigue: "We've flown through it this year. It's a lot less insanely stressful and hard to wrap my head around — it's like, Okay, I know these characters and I can breathe with them a little more."

The transitions between her various incarnations have gotten significantly less fraught as well. "I know the physicality," she explains. "It's in my body now — it's not something I'm trying to fit into anymore."

A certain cognitive dissonance attends a sit-down with Maslany, whose exuberant gaze and winter-casual sweater, jeans and sneakers evoke a fresh-faced undergrad rather than an accomplished professional with more than two decades of experience.

Playing the lead in an hour-long drama certainly takes experience — it is said to be the most demanding job in television. But Maslany not only appears in nearly every scene of *Orphan Black*, she has to shoot many of them multiple times — to interact with, well, herself.

The multi-clone scenes are captured by a motion-control camera, which remembers and repeats its movements exactly so that, in its first pass, Maslany is shot as one character interacting with an acting double (or two, if it's a three-clone scene) to block the other character's mark. Then, the scene is reshot, but without the doubles. Alone on the soundstage, Maslany addresses tennis balls on sticks, or Xs on the walls, which represent the other character (or characters), and responds to recorded dialogue heard via an earpiece. Repeat as necessary.

"The most characters we shoot in a day is three," Maslany says. "Those are extremely ridiculous days." Turning reflective, she continues: "I never wanted to do a series because I thought I'd get very bored with the routine of always playing this same character in the same sort of serial situation, but this one is obviously so opposite of that."

In fact, it suggests a best-of-both-worlds future: a hit show followed by a long TV career, but without the golden handcuffs that leave an actor indelibly linked to a specific role.

"She's a total natural, a working prodigy," says Graeme Manson, *Orphan Black*'s co-creator, writer and executive producer. "When I go to her with a scene, I can watch her read and respond emotionally to it and see that character just rise up. That's part of her secret — she uses emotion to access these characters and to put them on."

Beyond her acting ability, Manson says, Maslany is a leader on set as well as the company's indefatigable workhorse.

"She sets the tone for our whole family. Everyone wants to do their best work because she's working harder than everyone here, and everyone knows she's doing something special." He and fellow co-creator and executive producer-director, John Fawcett, "consider her a collaborator and a partner," Manson adds.

For costar Gavaris, Maslany is "my greatest teacher. There's no way to measure her ability, her versatility. I don't think there's another actor right now, especially in her age range, who could have tackled something like this. The value of getting to work with an actor of her caliber is not lost on me."



## MASLANY FIRST TOOK THE

stage in the Canadian heartland. Born in Regina, Saskatchewan, where her father was a woodworker and her mother a translator, she remembers being hooked early on. "I loved performing from a really, really early age," says the actress, whose look is both undeniably but indistinctly ethnic — she's of German and Ukrainian ancestry. "I loved having people watch me."

She began appearing in local musicals and on television when she was nine, and by the time she was a teen, she was seen in productions throughout Canada. She passed on college, instead moving to Toronto to work and study acting full-time, while taking time to make the rounds in L.A.'s pilot season. She's worked steadily in film and television since 2002, her first big break coming in the 2009 feature *Grown Up Movie Star*, which earned her a special jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010.

However, knowing what *Orphan Black* viewers know, the most intriguing entry on Maslany's résumé is the teen years she spent on the improv scene, specifically in the Canadian Improv Games, a national team competition for high schoolers. For Maslany, it was an indispensable experience.

"It's such a highly structured shoot, and you have to find [your way] quite quickly," she says of *Orphan Black*. "Plot for me is like math — it just makes no sense — so I have to stay in the moment. What improv taught me is saying yes to the situation and the moment."

The result was that rare combination of youth and seasoning that Fawcett — who worked with Maslany on the 2004 teen horror flick *Ginger Snaps 2* — remembered. "She is very much a character actress," he says of her skill set. "People might not have seen her as fitting into that perfect leading-lady category. She fits into this other thing, where you go if you want something else, something a little offbeat. That made her perfect for us."

Back in 2000, Manson and Fawcett envisioned *Orphan Black* as a feature film, eventually expanding the concept, turning it into a series and selling the pilot to Temple Street Productions in 2007. Finding an outlet proved difficult — there were no takers among U.S. networks, mostly because the show's lead had not been cast.

In 2010, Richard De Croce, BBC America's senior vice-president of programming, received the script from Temple Street, and after Perry Simon joined as general manager later that year, the network began developing original programming. *Orphan Black* would become the channel's second original scripted commission after *Copper*.

But first, a make-or-break casting process would unfold, during which, Manson says, the producers saw more than 100 young women of the right "age and ilk" for the role. It ultimately came down to two intensive days with five finalists (one was Evelyne Brochu, who would be cast as the enigmatic Delphine on *Orphan*).

"It was super-intensive," Manson recalls. "They had to do Sarah. They had to do Sarah pretending to be Beth. They had to do Katja. They had to do Alison, and they had to do Cosima, shifting gears while literally standing in front of everyone. It was like the acting Olympics."

The finalists also had to audition with the would-be Felixes the producers were considering, Gavaris among

them. "Tat," he says, using her nickname, "was the only one I didn't get a chance to rehearse with before the chemistry test. But I walked in and it was like witchcraft, magic. I'd read the scene we did 500 times beforehand, I'm sure, but Felix didn't really come alive till he was paired with his Sarah."

Ivan Schneeberg and David Fortier, co-presidents of Temple Street Productions and executive producers of *Orphan Black*, had worked with Maslany on a previous series, *Being Erica*, and had cast her as Mary in their Christmas-themed miniseries, *The Nativity*. Says Schneeberg of the *Orphan* casting ordeal: "BBC America and the other broadcasters didn't know that we thought her to be our secret weapon, objectively, and she still wowed everybody."

Since then, she's become a sensation in the sci-fi world, as evidenced by her reception at last summer's Comic-Con in San Diego. "It was howling," Manson says. "It was [like] Beatles' fans."

"We flew out there on the day of the Emmy nominations," Fawcett recalls. "We had more press [attention] because she wasn't nominated than if she would've been nominated. They booked us a 500-seat theater for our Q-and-A and ended up having to turn away over 1,000 people. They had to hustle us out of there with security through some back hallway and into big, black Escalades. It was kind of cool."

And now it's on to season two, in which, says Schneeberg, the goal is to "take it from being an insider-talked-about show to making it part of the zeitgeist."

Naturally, there will be a deepening of the show's mythology and its gallery of characters. "The universe is expanding rapidly, rapidly, rapidly. Each of the clones' worlds is becoming more detailed, and we're getting to meet people within those worlds," Maslany says, alluding to upcoming subplots. "[The clones are] becoming more malleable, more shiftable, and as much as that adds more intricacy to [the plot], it's in that that I find more breath and relaxation."

As for Sarah, if the first season was essentially a redemption story in which she evolved from criminal to heroine, Maslany says that this year — with new revelations about the conspiracy as well as Kira's abduction — Sarah now turns avenging angel.

"There's this desperation in her that's new," she says. "She'll stop at nothing now, and it sort of incites a war between her and Rachel."

And while the clones came together and got acquainted in season one, "[they're] kind of displaced and there's a decided lack of unity this year," Maslany says. That said, she laughs, "I don't even remember what we shot yesterday!"

To ease the strain on cast and crew during production of season two, the company was given some additional shooting days. Viewers may not notice the difference, but they will see some recognizable guest stars, including Michelle Forbes (*The Killing*) and Patrick J. Adams (*Suits*), as well as a new regular cast member, Michiel Huisman (*Nashville*).

It's a safe bet that, as spring turns to summer, Maslany will be the focus of an intense awards-season push. On this day, though, she is looking forward to next week's final "Cut!" Her first order of business? "I just want to take a month off to be a human being."

Singular, not plural. ©







DRESS BY **PETER PILOTTO** AT HOLT RENFREW