

# A L M O S T A N A N G E L

THINGS ARE LOOKING UP FOR JAMEELA JAMIL, STAR  
OF CELESTIAL SITCOM THE GOOD PLACE, SENSITIVE  
SOUL AND ALL-ROUND HEAVENLY CREATURE

WORDS **MATT GLASBY** / PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN TSIAVIS**





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Dress by Colton Dane.  
Necklaces by Maya  
Brenner and Zoe Chicco.  
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This page: Suit by Styland.  
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**F**ame can be a topsy-turvy master/mistress/mistress. One minute you're riding high, posing for photos for an A-list entertainment magazine; the next you're flat on the floor. So it is for British presenter-turned-actor-turned-activist Jameela Jamil who, when we touch base a few days after our LA shoot, has popped a ligament in her ankle playing tennis. "Every single time – annually – I try to exercise, I get hurt," she says. "I've realised that if god had intended me to exercise, he would have put Snickers on the floor. They used to call me 'Bambi' on T4, because every time I walk it looks like it's the first time." Ah yes, T4, that staple of Saturday morning TV, which Jamil presented from 2009 to 2012, and whose audience consisted of confused children, still-up students and the terminally hungover – this writer included. Alongside the likes of Alexa Chung and Nick Grimshaw, Jamil introduced a series of shiny, happy programmes to ease you into the weekend, and interviewed celebs like a sassy best friend. "How weird that you've woken up to me for all those years!" she says. "It's so strange being interviewed now I can't even tell you. You've no idea how much I want to ask you about what you have coming up right now, and about

your childhood." Erm, that isn't really how this works. "Let's do yours first and move on to ours if there's time," we offer – a lie, but a white one.

Nostalgia aside, the real reason we're talking is NBC's *The Good Place*, the latest all-conquering comedy from Michael Schur (*The Office US*, *Parks and Recreation*). The elevator pitch is simple but irresistible – think Sartre rewriting *The Truman Show*. A bunch of mismatched characters find themselves in Heaven, a primary-hued toy-town overseen by twinkly architect Ted Danson. Problem is, not all of them deserve to be there. Kristen Bell (*Frozen*) plays the audience's avatar, the flawed but funny Eleanor Shellstrop, who's arrived in *The Good Place* by mistake and must try to blend in. Jamil plays Eleanor's goody-two-shoes next-door neighbour Tahani Al-Jamil (the name means "Congratulations,

**"I came to America to not be on TV anymore"**

Beautiful"), a nuclear-grade name-dropper/virtue-signaller who's given to pronouncements such as: "This reminds me of my time in Vietnam picking up mortar shells with my godmother, Diana."

The way Jamil (the real one) tells it, getting the role was a total fluke. But then the way she tells it, *everything* has been a total fluke. "I came over to America not to be on TV anymore, because I'm like, I've done that now and now I'd like to be a writer please," she recalls. She got an agent, who tried to persuade her to audition for the role. "I said, 'No! I don't know how to act. I don't know what I'm doing. I'll die in front of Ted Danson!' But they really, really, really strongly urged slash forced me to go."

Needless to say, she nailed it, but not without a teeny white lie of her own. "I told them I'd done some theatre," she laughs. At school?! "Yes, basically. I wasn't lying. I played Oliver's >



Dress by Mestiza.  
Shoes by Manolo Blahnik.  
Rings and bracelet by  
Loren Stewart

Jumpsuit by  
Lethicia Bronstein.  
Shoes by Manolo Blahnik.  
Bracelet and necklace  
by Loren Stewart.  
Ring by Bare Collection



mother when I was six and I had one line: 'Give me my baby!' So I have done some theatre." In which case, surely everyone's "done some theatre"? "Well, great, maybe we'll act together in something," she laughs.

To begin with, she found the whole thing "absolutely terrifying. I was really shocked and scared and then it just felt very surreal for the entire first season, but Ted was very kind and he went out of his way to make me comfortable, as did Kristen and Mike." Danson's tactic? "He kept on pretending to fart on me, which was a really weird choice but it completely worked. He could tell that he was my hero, probably because I couldn't close my mouth and was just gawking at him all the time, so he was just trying to humanise himself to me."

Now gearing up for its third season, the show is a smash-hit, even inspiring its own lingo. Because nobody's allowed to swear in Heaven, Eleanor's potty-minded proclamations are pre-censored. "Somebody royally forked up," she'll say. Or, "Son of a bench!" Or - our favourite - "Holy forking shirtballs!" Jamil loves it. "We haven't been filming for about seven months, which is why I'm effing and blinding," she says. "You can replace all of my effs and blinds with 'forks' and 'benches' if you want. But once we start filming it really gets into all of us. It makes it so >

**"I find it hard to say I'm an actress. It still feels weird to me"**



Dress by Ronny Kobo.  
Skirt by Lucia Maria  
Hohan. Bra by Maison  
Margiela. Bracelet and  
rings by Loren Stewart

much less stressful for me to be around children because I've got such a foul mouth."

Another sure sign that the show has caught the public's imagination is the erotic fan fiction she receives, which turns Eleanor and Tahani into frenemies with benefits. "It's so weird, but so thoughtful. So weirdly thoughtful," she says. "Before, people just sent me pictures of their penises – and not a lot of thought goes into that, you know? But they illustrate the erotic fiction with beautiful, Disney-esque pictures and they write these really elaborate stories that always start the same way, which is

**“Enjoy your looks but don't make them define you”**

that me and Kristen are laughing and suddenly the laughter turns into playing with each other's hair, then slowly we begin to kiss. It's so lovely, so sensitive and romantic. You can tell women are writing it.”

Listening to Jamil, a pattern becomes clear. She's self-deprecating to the point of self-sabotage, but she gets the job done all the same. This strange mixture of low self-esteem and inner steel is perhaps something to do with



being bullied at school, and a car accident that nearly paralysed her aged 17. When it comes to acting, she claims, "I'm no talent, all sponge", suggesting she "ingested it via osmosis" because "nobody watched as much telly as I did. Telly was my only friend until I was 19." Yet she's holding her own alongside Danson, Bell et al. "I still find it hard to say I'm an actress because it's still feels so weird to me, but it's been so much fun," she says. "I'm so happy that they made me go to the audition. I would never have put myself up for something like this, I would never have thought I was worth this. And it was the same in England. I never thought I was good enough to host something or be on the radio and I've always had very kind people support me and push me. I wish that I'd believed in myself more because it would have made my life less stressful – at least for them.”

Having shushed her inner critic – for now – she's starting to share the wealth. After years of being called too thin or too fat by the British tabloids, she finally snapped when she read an Instagram post featuring the Kardashian clan with their weights written over their bodies. Enough, she decided, was enough. "It was such a classic way of showing how society values women," she says. "You would never see something like that with men. Nobody cares what men weigh. So I just wrote back, without any intention of anything else happening, how I 'weigh' myself, and I put down all my achievements and relationships and the things that I love about my life. That's what I'll evaluate about myself on my deathbed, not what size my jeans were.”

The I Weigh hashtag was born, and, "Without me inviting them, the replies just started coming in the hundreds, then eventually thousands, with women saying how they 'weigh'

themselves, just these incredible stories of cancer survivors and mothers and nurses or doctors or scientists who've saved so many lives and invented so many things. I've never seen anything like it." She has big plans for where I Weigh goes next, but how does it sit with photos like these, albeit ones that – at her insistence – haven't been retouched.

"There's nothing wrong with enjoying your exterior and wearing nice clothes, as long as it's rounded," she says. "Enjoy your looks, but don't make them part of your top 10, don't make them define you. I can do a tiny bit of modelling, but I'm also doing a hell of a lot of writing, campaigning, acting, comedy. I have my own company for disabled people, Why Not People. You should be proud of all of your life, don't just feel anxiety about what you look like otherwise it makes you seem really one-dimensional and we're not like that, women are not like that.”

**“I would never have thought I was worth this”**

Watch **The Good Place** onboard now

No one could accuse Jamil of being one-dimensional. Despite her achievements, she hasn't forgotten how to give funny, T4-style soundbites. What, we wonder, would she ask if interviewing herself? "Good question!" She thinks for a second. "What's under your fringe?" A pause. Well? "A very small penis." What does The Bad Place look like? No pause this time. "A gym!" And, finally, the biggie: which way is she going when she dies, up or down? "Oh god, I think I'm going down," she says. "I steal people's food when they go to the toilet, I'm definitely going to The Bad Place." On this evidence, we respectfully disagree. ■

