

OUT OF OFFICE

The TV drama *Severance* has been a word-of-mouth hit — and the previously unknown Britt Lower its breakout star. **Hadley Freeman** meets her

Photographs **Bridget Fleming** Styling **Bárbara Vélez**

When Britt Lower, who plays the internet’s favourite TV character, Helly R from the Apple TV+ series *Severance*, appears on my computer screen in what appears to be an entirely white room, there is one overwhelmingly urgent question to ask: is she zoomin’ from Lumon? She makes one of her big open-mouthed laughs. “No, no, it’s a dressing room,” she says, looking extremely cool in an oversized black leather bomber jacket over a crisp white shirt. She angles the camera so I can see the rail of clothes behind her. “Phew,” we say in sync.

As *Severance* fans know (and there are a lot of us — the recently finished second series made it the most watched show in Apple TV+ history, surpassing *Ted Lasso*), Lumon is the office-slash-prison supervised by the terrifying Ms Cobel (Patricia Arquette) where the main characters Helly R, Mark S (Adam Scott), Irving B

(John Turturro) and Dylan G (Zach Cherry), with a bonus appearance from Burt G (Christopher Walken), are forced to toil after undergoing severance. That is the gruesome medical procedure that severs a person’s consciousness into an “innie” and “outie”. This has nothing to do with belly buttons, but is about separating their Lumon Industries personality (“innie”) from their outside one (“outie”), and while the outies are aware of the innies — and, eventually, vice versa — they have no shared memories. Written by Dan Erickson and directed by the extremely details-focused Ben Stiller, the show occupies a similar hyper-normal, hyper-surreal territory as *Twin Peaks* (why are there baby goats in this normcore office?), while also being a bit like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* crossed with *The Office*. But it is its own entirely original self.

Everything, from the food in the fridges onwards, is freighted with significance, and not (thank God) in a *Lost*-like red herring way. “Each character’s hair has a silhouette that really informs who they are, so for Ben flyaway hairs cannot exist,” Lower says (naturally, Stiller stipulated that Helly R’s hair had to be red). In a very Lumon-like act of rebellion, at the end of each day of shooting Lower and Scott would furiously muss up their hair, finally free of Stiller’s fussing. Is it fair to describe Stiller as a huge control freak? “Um, no, I think he’s very precise and the look of the show is very exacting. But he’s also incredibly playful and collaborative,” she says.

Well, his playful precision definitely paid off, and the show, which has been commissioned for a third series, has sparked an enormous amount of critical discourse, ranging from what the show says about modern attitudes to work to, um, what’s with all the dancing?

Lower, 39, tries not to be too online, so she hasn’t gone through the many (many, many) Reddit threads dissecting the show. But she frequently reposts fan art on



Lower with her *Severance* castmates, from left, Adam Scott, Zach Cherry and John Turturro

Shirt, £860, blazer, £2,465, jacket, £4,890, trousers, £1,180, and belt, £535, Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello



Above Bikini top, £540 (part of a set), silk slip, £780, blue dress, £2,700, grey knit, £850, shoes, £870, and socks, £320, Miu Miu

her Instagram Stories, and she and fellow cast members have come up with a few of their own theories. “We talked a lot about the parallels to be drawn from the way the innies arrive at work and what we’re doing as actors. Like them, we put on a new outfit that someone else chose, we assume a new identity and then walk through winding halls to get to a set with even more winding halls,” she says. (The maze-like hallways are to *Severance* what private planes were to *Succession*: the only way to get around and the place where only bad things happen.) “But you can make so many analogies. We all compartmentalise different parts of our life, like you might behave differently with your friends than when you go home for the holidays, right? Plus the whole idea of fighting with yourself. That feels really relatable.”

And then there’s Helly R herself, who realises that her outie, Helena — and I feel like I’m now fighting with myself not to give anything away — embodies everything she loathes. Lower deservedly won a 2022 Hollywood Critics Association TV award for her remarkable portrayal of the cold and controlled Helena and bold and brave Helly R. Her character(s) have, by far, garnered the most obsessive fan attention, from the colour of her sweater-and-skirt combos (all guided by Stiller, of course) to her distinctive physicality. Can we please talk about Helly R’s stomping walk? “It always made sense to me that Helly would be pure consciousness, breaking the rules and defying authority. So I can’t really explain it — that’s just how she walks!”

Lower made playlists to help her get into her characters’ mindsets: “Patti Smith was a big inspiration for Helly R, and when I watch the first season I really feel Patti’s music and essence because she was really alive in me then. And with Helena I listened to the soundtrack for the film *Orlando*, because Tilda Swinton’s portrayal of the isolated duke felt really resonant.”

But what Lower brought most to her portrayal of Helly R was herself. Aside from roles in the American TV series *Unforgettable* (2011-14) and *Man Seeking Woman* (2015-17), she was, really, unknown before *Severance*, to the point she couldn’t even get an in-person audition for the show. Instead, she did a self-tape in her own bathroom (“That’s where the good lighting was”). Stiller watched it and as he later said on his enjoyably obsessive (if dryly titled) podcast *The Severance Podcast with Ben Stiller & Adam Scott*, “I was watching and thinking, oh wow. This is somehow what was in my mind, what I imagined.”

In person Lower has Helena’s careful precision and self-control, especially when it comes to what she reveals about herself. There has been much online speculation about Lower’s private life, mainly because

‘Pierce Brosnan was my very first crush, but also he was who I wanted to be. The whole James Bond’

she has kept so shtoom about it, and that’s not changing today; when I ask if she lives by herself in her home in Brooklyn, she pauses a millisecond and replies, “I prefer to not [answer], um, yeah. You know, this is all so new to me, so I still feel like I’m adjusting to the questions.” And fair enough.

She also absolutely won’t be drawn on any details about the third series, even when it will start filming, but that, she says, isn’t because of discretion: “I genuinely know nothing.” But if she’s 10 per cent Helena, I’d say she’s 90 per cent Helly R, that “very alive rebel within this person who has to maintain a great deal of control”, as she describes her character. For a start, in the periods after filming each series of *Severance* (the second was delayed due to the writers’ strikes) she literally ran away and joined a circus. “I always loved the circus,” she says as simply as if describing why she decided to repaint her kitchen. “I was a ringmaster of sorts, addressing the audience and being a kind of guide through the acts. It was just about using a different muscle than in TV and movies, in that it’s live, so you get to be in sync with the audience.”

It was also about escape: on her Instagram she often posts photos of herself driving around the country with her green compact caravan attached to her car: “Yeah, escape is something I crave. Driving has such a meditative quality and going on road trips helps me to metabolise things. I grew up camping with my dad, so when I can I go to get some quietude with myself.” She often goes camping after break-ups; another post-break-up gesture was dying her underarm hair — a total Helly R move. “It was a while ago, like in 2017, maybe. But I loved it,” she says with a grin.

Lower grew up in rural Illinois, “really in a forest, in the middle of a prairie. My childhood memories are of wilderness.” She comes from a long line of farmers — her mother was a teacher, her father a farm manager — but her mother was always interested in creativity, to the point she named her daughter after the Swedish actress and model Britt Ekland.

Mother and daughter set up a face-painting business when Lower was a teenager, and her mother still runs it and is known as the Zoo Lady: “My mom was always writing plays when I was growing up. She started a dance studio in our town, she would host variety shows in our house. I was a really shy kid who was happy in the corner, but I was lucky to have a mother who encouraged me out of my comfort zone to put on dance shows. When I decided to focus on acting in college, in one way it was like me deciding to go to outer space, because we didn’t know anyone who was a professional actor. But my mom had taught me you don’t need permission to be an artist.”

The artists whose careers inspired her include Swinton, Cate Blanchett and Katharine Hepburn. Oh, and Pierce Brosnan: “He was my very first crush, but also he was who I wanted to be. The whole James Bond.”

Lower never looked at acting as a means to becoming famous. For her it was about being part of different families and scaring herself a little. She is still part of her college friends’ improv group, Frat Boyz, which she does because “each time it’s like stepping into the



Above Jacket, trousers and shoes, prices on application, Loewe

Hair Kenna at Art Department.

Make-up Maki Ryoke at Walter Schupfer Management.

Local production Francesca Valente for 102 NYC

unknown”, and she has now brought in Cherry, her *Severance* co-star. “Zach’s just so funny and together we are really mischievous, so I had to bring him into the team.” *Severance* has become a kind of quasi-family for her: she, Cherry and Turturro are big fans of New York Liberty — the Brooklyn women’s basketball team — and go to the games together, while she and Scott are old friends, having worked together in 2017 on the short-lived TV series *Ghosted*. “I played his wife and there was a scene where I smashed his head into a table and threw a chair through a window,” she says, smiling at the memory.

But now she needs to get dressed — hence the dressing room — and go to one of her two premieres this month, for the indie films *Psycho Therapy* (co-starring Steve Buscemi) and *Darkest Miriam*. She’s also co-starring with Jamie Lee Curtis in the horror film *Sender*, which is currently in production. “I love independent film, so to have two films coming out now, I am buzzing. I just want to keep doing this.” Keep making movies and *Severance*? “Yes. And to keep pushing against the growth edge of fear.” It could be a Lumon catchphrase. ■

Series one and two of Severance are available on Apple TV+