

**I loved the opportunity to play someone on the edge. That kind of intensity doesn't come along for me very often**

Clare Grogan is relishing a movie role as a woman on the brink, largely because real life couldn't be more different for the sunny actor and singer – soon to tour with *Altered Images*.  
By **Janet Christie**. Portraits by **Debra Hurford Brown**

There's no point asking Clare Grogan about her performance in her new film *Delirium* because watching herself makes the singer and actor come out in a cold sweat. Just talking about it prompts nervous giggles.

"No, no, no, no! I haven't seen it and probably never will. No, I tend not to watch things that I do. I stay for the first five minutes then go and pace outside. You can only ever see your faults. I just irritate the life out of myself. I'd love to be sitting in a chair going 'god I'm good', but you just don't do that."

As for the reaction to the film, which was shown at the Moscow Film Festival, promoted at Cannes and is now on UK release, how has it gone so far? "I genuinely don't know," she laughs. "You'd have to ask the producer." Grogan in conversation is fizzy and fun, most sentences ending with her dissolving into laughter as she talks about the new film and her life, lived in and out of the spotlight. Now 55 she still has the skittish enthusiasm of the pop pixie with the spiky hair and floppy skirts who topped the charts with new wave band *Altered Images* in the 1980s and starred in 1981 hit comedy *Gregory's Girl*. She comes across as someone

determined to enjoy the good things in life without wasting a moment stressing the small stuff.

This couldn't be more of a contrast to her latest role as the wife of a classical composer whose past comes back to haunt him. Myriam is a former 80s singer, but that's where the similarities with Grogan end. She's a woman on the edge, who has been eclipsed by her husband, played by Gareth Jones, who is also the director of the film. Appointed head of a prestigious university music college he's running out of time to compose a requiem for the institution's centennial celebrations and is similarly close to breaking point, while Myriam has lost her voice and confidence at the bottom of a whisky glass. Throw in infidelity and past lives that explode into the present, and you can see why the film earns its title of *Delirium*.

Grogan has relished the opportunity to play a character who is spectacularly unravelling, a far cry from her sunny persona as the lead singer of a band best remembered for their upbeat hits like *Happy Birthday* and *I Could Be Happy* and the comic roles she's been cast in since *Gregory's Girl*. She readily admits she knows next to nothing about classical music, but felt privileged to be filming at the







University of London's spectacular Royal Holloway campus with its gilded chapel.

"I loved the opportunity to play someone on the edge. I just wanted to be as honest and vulnerable as I could, and I hope that worked. I just let myself go. I think all of us go through a phase where we unravel and it's about whether you've got the strength to put yourself back together again." She laughs.

"I do a lot of comedy – I've just done radio comedy with Josie Long – and I love that, but playing somebody who is really on the brink was great. My husband said 'not much of a stretch really for you Clare!' She giggles. Grogan's husband is Stephen Lironi, fellow Altered Image member, who went on to become a record producer and is now a restaurateur.

"It was nice because that kind of intensity doesn't come along for me that often," says Grogan. "I thought yes, I'd love the chance to be this serious." Cue another giggle.

"I think my face lends itself to comedy, I really do, I'm kind of goofy. I remember a director saying to me 'Clare, if you could just stop moving your face around so much'. But that's never going to happen. Over the years I've done lots of different things but I've found a wee spot within the world of comedy that I love. But like all actors, I love to be stretched and this was an opportunity to do that."

The "lots of different things" Grogan has done over the years includes screen appearances in another Bill Forsyth comedy, *Comfort and Joy* in 1984 then in the cult sci-fi sitcom *Red Dwarf*. She had the dubious pleasure of kissing Ian Beale in *EastEnders* then established her cool credentials playing Freya Mavor's mother Shelley in *Skins*, a character Grogan describes as "way out there", as well as appearing in the long-running, award-winning BBC school drama *Waterloo Road*. She's appeared in a *Father Ted* episode and her theatre



**Clare Grogan today, main; with Gareth Jones in new film *Delirium*, top; in *Altered Images* in 1982, above; in *Gregory's Girl* with John Gordon Sinclair, 1981, opposite top; in TV drama *Waterloo Road*, opposite bottom**

outings include Rita in *Educating Rita* at Dundee Rep.

"I really identified with Myriam because you get to a certain point in your life where you think 'is this it?' and feel that you're running out of time. She couldn't quite let go of who she had been and she has become invisible to her family and everyone else. That's why I suggested everything she wears should be white or beige because she was fading away. I know that sounds a bit actor-y but I think that's something that happens to you when you get older. And the more she felt she was fading away, the louder and more hysterical she became. At least that's what I was trying to do."

Fading away isn't something Grogan feels she did, although

*"I was brought up with a strong work ethic and I never want to stop being on a stage with people looking at me"*

being in a hit film and band straight out of school is a hard act to follow. However, Grogan has been busy over the past three decades. As well as parenting her daughter Elle, acting and gigging as Altered Images, Grogan and her husband run two restaurants in London, serving up tapas and majoring on Scottish seafood. Bar Esteban is in Crouch End, not too far from their London home, and then there's the more recently opened Escocesa in Stoke Newington. "Yeah, it's been busy, Spanish food with a Scottish twist, especially lovely Scottish seafood; that's a passion of my husband's."

"I've found a really comfortable place for myself," she says, "and sometimes I want to break away from that, but my working life has got to suit my private life and home life. It's well documented how long I waited to become a mum and it just didn't make sense to me to take myself off for weeks on end when that happened."

After several miscarriages and failed IVF over ten years, Grogan and her husband, adopted their daughter Elle in 2005, now 12.

"You really have to know where you're needed sometimes in life. I think that's a decision a lot of working mums make, particularly when you work in something where you have to be away from home. For me, I just decided I would do what I could, but pretty much be as home-based as I could."

"But I'm going on tour for the first time in 12 years in October for a 32 date tour with Midge Ure so that'll be...em..." Here she runs out of words then settles on "Fun!", rounding it off with a laugh. Grogan isn't wasting time worrying about how it will go, but is rushing to dive straight in.

"I'm slightly in denial about it," she says. "But it will be fine...because it will have to be. I'm really looking forward to it. It's quite bad timing, but everything in life is for me. I keep saying to people I have no master



plan, literally everything is on a whim."

Grogan is keen to point out there are no original members apart from her, and that's she's using a band the promoters are providing. "I don't want anyone being disappointed that it's not the original line-up because that would never happen. Everyone's moved on," she says.

Altered Images had a string of hits in the early 1980s with *Happy Birthday*, *Don't Talk To Me About Love*, *I Could Be Happy* and *See Those Eyes* and three top 30 albums, with Grogan also inspiring Gary Kemp to write the Spandau Ballet hit *True*.

"It was such a crazy joyful thing to do as someone who has just left school. Until it wasn't. It was all so quick and exciting and with the

arrogance of youth I started off not giving a s\*\*\* in a weird way and when people started having their opinions about you, you start taking that on board and it can really get to you."

Splitting up after the release of their third album *Bite* in 1983, the members went on to do other things, while Grogan concentrated on acting and her family with occasional outings to perform as Altered Images on tours featuring 1980s acts.

"If someone had told my 18-year-old self I would be doing this in my fifties, that would have been weird. I think as you get older you start caring less what people think. And I think that has given me a sort of boldness. I actually, genuinely do not care. To be able to sing these songs in your 50s you have to shrug things off. I want

people to enjoy what I do, but see if they don't, that's not going to impact on me at all. When I was young I had this real need for everyone to get it and like it and took it very personally when they didn't. It's a great thing not being in that position any more because nothing is riding on it. It's about me wanting to do stuff that I really enjoy. And wanting to surprise people again, a wee bit. I don't view my age as something that prevents me from doing things. I think it allows me to push myself a little bit more. Because there's absolutely nothing you can do about it, so I just run with it, you know.

"I was brought up with a strong work ethic and I never want to stop being on a stage with people looking at me. I don't know what that is and



I can't ever imagine growing out of that. I never know what's going to happen next, that's the truth. My ambition in life is just to keep going in terms of my work and it's worked out not too badly for a long time now and I just think I've found... a very weird niche for myself. The things I get asked to do are always kind of out there and I just hope it continues like that. I've no desire to analyse it too much. I just hope the opportunities keep coming and if I can make them work, I'm even more delighted."

Born in Glasgow in 1962, to Patricia, a hairdresser and Patrick, who worked at Glasgow fish market, the teenage Grogan was still at school and working in a restaurant in the West End when she got her big break. In between shifts she was jumping in transit vans and travelling through the night to do John Peel sessions in London with Altered Images. When *Gregory's Girl* director Bill Forsyth asked her if she'd like to be in a film he was making and could he have her number, she turned him down.

"I said no. Because I didn't give my number to strangers but he got in touch later so yeah... The whole experience is abstract to me but it was a special time and Gordon [co-star John Gordon Sinclair] and I are still close. *Gregory's Girl* was the most amazing calling card again and again and being involved in that has opened doors for me."

Making it as a household name when she was still a teen was the impetus behind the Tallulah series of children's books Grogan wrote for her daughter, Elle, about a girl who wants to be a pop star, the first published

in 2008. Grogan's own experiences in the pop world inform those of Tallulah Gosh.

"I really wanted a way of trying to explain to Elle how I feel about things because when you've got a daughter you want to give them some tools for life. I was in a tricky position because I literally left school and became a pop star and made a film. So when she was younger I wanted to find a way of making her think about the dreams you have and that they can come true, but also that you have to work really, really hard and make a lot of sacrifices, whatever it is.

"Although I say I don't care what people think, I care about what I do and want to get it right. People underestimate how hard it is to stay in this business for 35 years and I've kind of clung on for dear life because I'm not going to do anything else. I'm probably unemployable in the real world. So I've found something I love doing and I've had to create my own luck, and kept moving to keep working. You don't get to 55 and it's all been plain sailing, but I'm proud of the fact I've done as much as I have."

Although Grogan has no idea what's next after the tour with Midge Ure and The Christians, she has no plans to give up the limelight just yet, despite a recent comment from her daughter.

"She actually asked me where I would like my park bench, with the little plaque on it – you can tell she's grown up around London parks, chatting to little old ladies on benches – and I went, 'wait a minute, you're rushing me here!' I'm not ready for my park bench yet."

*Delirium is on general release now. Midge Ure with his Band. Electronica, The Christians and Altered Images featuring Clare Grogan, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, 10 October and Edinburgh Playhouse, 22 October, www.glasgowconcert.halls.com; www.atgtickets.com*