

# Model citizen

In June, supermodel and entrepreneur Elle 'The Body' Macpherson appeared in Harrogate to speak at the Yorkshire Business Convention. **Tony Greenway** selflessly volunteered for the job of interviewing her. ➔

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‘Who,’ asks the Editor, waving a press invite, ‘would like to interview Elle Macpherson in Harrogate?’ Shoving old ladies and small children out of the way, I register my interest by ripping the invite out of her hand and running out of the door. Yes, that would be quite nice, thanks.

It’s early June, and Elle – Australian supermodel, actress and entrepreneur – is in town to speak at the Yorkshire Business Convention at the Yorkshire Event Centre. She’s here to prove that she’s not just a pretty face and, thrillingly, to talk about her business knickers. Or is it her knickers business; either way more of that later.

Ringling the press office, I ask if I can have five minutes with Elle. ‘What? For an interview?’ Well, preferably. But I’m not fussy and I’m not from Harper’s Bazaar. I’ll have a game of Scrabble with her if she’d prefer. The reply is that a short chat should be possible just before she goes on stage to give a 45-minute presentation to the assembled delegates who are all big wheels in Yorkshire business; immediately afterwards she will jump on a helicopter bound for the convention’s sister conference in Hull. So I’m standing exactly where I’ve been told to stand when Elle emerges through the door.

The first thing that strikes you is how tall she is. Supermodels are supposed to be rangy, but this one, in her heels, must be 6ft 3ins if she’s an inch (her vital statistics show that she’s 6ft in her bare feet). The second thing you notice is – well... you know. Her eyes are big, deep chocolate pools, her dentistry gleams, her face is tanned and her expertly teased light brown hair falls in gentle, undulating curls across... Sorry. I’ll shut up now. But you get the picture.

Today, Elle is looking sharp in a flared pin-stripe trouser suit – and she’s also looking nervous. That’s surprising because this is a woman who has walked down catwalks wearing next to nothing (albeit by designers such as Versace,

Dior and Yves Saint-Laurent); who has featured on more covers of Sports Illustrated than anyone in the world; who has pitched business ideas to rooms full of suits, and who is so impossibly lithe she is nicknamed 'The Body' – a title she still retains in her mid forties. As a bonus, her business empire is worth millions. So if anyone is entitled to have an ego the size of the Australian outback, it's Elle Macpherson, but she speaks softly and without pretension in a voice that is a curious mix of Aussie and American twang. 'I've got to talk to 1,500 people in a minute,' she says, pointing to the main hall in the Event Centre. 'So of course I'm nervous. I'm just going to tell my story – I'm not here to preach and I tend not to give advice – and share the wisdoms I've gained on my journey. Business is where it's always been for me.'

Elle Macpherson Intimates, a lingerie collection she created in 1990, is now sold all over the world. Initially, market research told her that British women didn't care much about their underwear; but she didn't care much for the market research, and set to work designing a line of 'beautiful, comfortable' knickers for every body shape. Being a successful businesswoman, she says, was always part of her game plan – it's just that a two-week modelling shoot in the mid-1980s turned into a 20-odd year career in front of the cameras, and she became insanely famous as a result. Hey: as diversions go, it wasn't a bad one.

Saying 'cheese' wasn't enough for Elle, though. She never really thought it would be. 'I first stepped outside the box in 1989 when I left my modelling agency to form my own company and set up my various licensing deals,' she says. 'Listen, I wanted to study law originally.' Was that what you were going to do with your life? 'Yeah. My stepfather was a lawyer and I studied at Sydney University. So my business career now – and the shape it has taken – is quite in-keeping with what I always wanted to do.' The fact is, however, that Elle is best-known as a supermodel and is still fronting global advertising campaigns despite being 20 years older than most women in the industry. How long does she plan to go on for? 'I've just signed a deal with Revlon,' she says. 'So that's another three years at least. As long as I'm finding interest in it, I guess. I'm still doing it, and I'm 45.' You're 44, actually, I think, but – thankfully – don't say out loud. (God, this is dreadful. I know more about Elle Macpherson than Elle Macpherson does.)

A reporter from Look North asks if this is the first time that Elle has been to Yorkshire. It isn't. Apparently, the Aussie superstar loves the county and has been many times before for short breaks in – believe it or not – Whitby. She is the mother of Arpad, 10, and Aurelius, five – boys from

her former relationship with French-Swiss financier, Arpad Busson – and nothing takes precedence over her children. 'They always come first,' she says. 'They're the centre of my life. I fit my business arrangements around their school hours and their needs... I only have to deal with attention and glamour when I choose to promote a product. I choose not to have it in my personal life.'

The Look North reporter also asks if Elle feels pressure to have cosmetic surgery or treatments – and, ooh, it doesn't go well. 'I create lingerie for every different sort of body. That's my business. That's my job.' She looks testy. 'Look, I have a hard time with those questions, 'cos what am I supposed to say? "Yeah, it's a real pressure being beautiful." Bet that bit won't make it into the programme.'

We wonder how she finds time for her acting career with her ongoing portfolio of business interests. Usually, for

women of a certain age, roles in TV and movies are few and far between – but this law doesn't seem to apply to Elle. 'You know, it's really interesting,' she tells us, fizzing again. 'I get a lot of people asking me to do (film projects) today... and I think it's because as one matures emotionally – and therefore physically – we develop a greater capacity to tell stories. So I get people wanting me to work on a sitcom or present a TV show or appear in a movie. And sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. It depends on whether it resonates with my spirit.'

Erm, right, we say, not really understanding that last bit. So what's the worst acting experience you've ever had? 'They've all been amazing!' she says predictably. 'I did 10 movies in 10 years. Working with Anthony Hopkins' – she corrects herself – 'SIR Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin on The Edge, a David Mamet story,

was pretty extraordinary. I had a fantastic seven episode guest run on Friends (playing Joey's improbably glamorous flatmate) which a lot of people remember because it's on TV so often.' She laughs. 'Sirens was fun – that was the very first movie I did. I've worked with Woody Allen and Barbra Streisand and I did Batman with George Clooney.'

Yes. We weren't going to mention that one. So what are the film offers she's received recently? Elle Macpherson suddenly gives a loud, alarming cackle. 'Watch this space!' she says and disappears off to give her conference speech.

In the conference hall, she walks on stage and begins to show slides of herself in what can only be described as her skimpies. Sorry. There's no other way of saying it. There seems to be a lot of men here all of a sudden, and a couple of women walk out; but the story of her world-famous lingerie brand is received well. She is self-deprecating ('when I stopped appearing in the ads, sales increased. I don't know what that says about me!') and keen to work for

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charitable causes, such as UNICEF and campaigns for breast cancer awareness ('I'm a big believer that business can do well – and do good,' she says). Afterwards, there is a lot of applause and she looks relieved. Waving some silk lingerie at the audience she tells them: 'I forgot to say: don't leave home without clean underwear – you never know when you might need them!'

Well, right. Being photographed in them, designing them or selling them, knickers have certainly worked wonders for Elle Macpherson.