

Style & Substance

Esquire

MICHAEL FASSBENDER PHOTOGRAPHED FOR ESQUIRE BY ALICE HAWKINS

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MICHAEL FASSBENDER

IS REALLY, REALLY ENJOYING HIS MOMENT
BY MICHAEL HOLDEN

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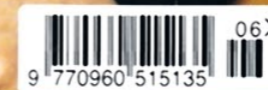
ASK AA GILL
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Navy leather blouson jacket, £2,295; grey chambray shirt, £350, both by Burberry Prorsum. Beige cotton chinos, £95, by Gant Rugger

IF YOU HAD THIS GUY'S LIFE, YOU'D BE GRINNING TOO

ALREADY THE MOST TALKED ABOUT ACTOR OF HIS GENERATION, THIS MONTH MICHAEL FASSBENDER CONFIRMS HIS MOVE FROM ART-HOUSE REVELATION TO MAINSTREAM FORCE THANKS TO RIDLEY SCOTT'S SCI-FI BLOCKBUSTER PROMETHEUS. WATCH HIM FLY

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL HOLDEN
PHOTOS BY ALICE HAWKINS
FASHION BY GARETH SCOURFIELD



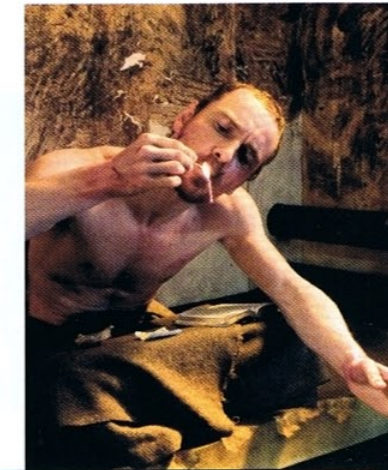
Perhaps acting and fame are both questions of exposure. What you show and don't show, how and where you show up at all. On and off screen, Michael Fassbender has accelerated lately into a tangible presence — no longer a rumoured talent of the left field but a mainstream force as well. Not just one of our best actors, but our next movie star. A man whom, when you tell people you are going to meet him they say not "Who?" but "Oh..." mostly. Which is good in some respects of course, but like so many things in life, all that exposure cuts both ways.

It is testament to the efficacy of this magazine and also Fassbender's willingness to engage with the publicity end of the film-making equation that, prior to our meeting, a document arrives on my computer comprised of recent interviews that is more than 100 pages long. In a comparatively short career — his breakthrough was the film *Hunger*, in 2008 — there is not much this 35-year-old German-Irish actor has not discussed already, the facts and stats of his life and work (and eyes and accent, *et al*) are laid out in some detail elsewhere should you wish to find them, and there seems little sense in dwelling too long on them here. Indeed, so well represented and thoroughly interviewed is he that even what I had imagined was my most incisive question — what would Carl Jung (who he plays in *A Dangerous Method*) have made of Brandon (the sex addict he plays in *Shame*)? — has already been asked and answered neatly ("He would have sent him to Freud").

A high percentage of these interviews begin with the interviewer describing Fassbender in a well-appointed hotel, at the crux of his career. The preponderance of this image is very much on my mind as I enter a well-appointed hotel at the crux of his career wondering how to make things different, but these matters are soon resolved. In the days prior to the interview, something strange has happened. When I am not reading the 100-page document about Fassbender in printed form or seeing other things about him on computer screens, I am watching him in cinemas. Three times in one week (itself a testament to his current status), I watch the adverts give way to some recent exhibition of his attributes. It is only towards the end of what I have come to think of as The Fassbender Binge, a period spent lurking in cinemas in daytime and hunched over monitors by night, that I realise this is like an odd platonic reflection of what his sex-addicted character in *Shame* is up to.

Happily, when the time comes for this furtive study to evolve into an actual encounter, he is

Hunger (2008), below, a taste of things to come; followed by *Fish Tank* (2009) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009)



"It would be wrong to say I don't get seduced by certain things"



OPPOSITE Navy chunky knit cardigan, £345; cream cotton henley, £100; beige cotton chinos, £189, all by Polo Ralph Lauren

sufficiently amused by the journalist-as-compulsive masturbator comparison that all concerns about the inbuilt clichés of the interview scenario are dismissed by laughter — his, which lies somewhere between a cackle and a gasp, occasionally accelerating to the point where he makes no sound at all. "God help you," he sympathises when the power of speech returns. "You'll have realised how much I repeat myself."

The best interviews, he thinks, are "where there's nothing to promote or sell". This proves fortunate since neither of us has seen the movie that he is, in theory, here to discuss. Ridley Scott's *Alien* prequel, *Prometheus*, in which he stars, is a project the precise shape of which remains elusive even to those involved. Less shrouded in secrecy — though perhaps no less indicative of his rise — is that another of his recently wrapped performances was on *Top Gear*. This proves a good place to start.

"I like racing," he says, in a way that suggests he really likes racing. "Motor racing, mainly Formula 1 and Moto GP." And what is it about those that appeals? "I don't know... Initially it's the speed. I always wanted to drive cars, when I was 12 I was taking a car out. I just wanted to drive, I couldn't wait to be 17, get the licence, do that. Then I started watching Formula 1 when I was probably 15, 16, started getting into it. I don't know, there's the excitement. It was the speed and the danger I think that were initially attractive to me."

Motor racing is a traditional passion among actors — Steve McQueen and Paul Newman spring immediately to mind — and surely there must be some deeper connection between the two things? Fassbender though, briefly dismayed by the news from a hotel waiter that he has missed breakfast and must find sustenance instead from the overwrought lunch menu (sea bass ceviche standing in for the eggs he really wanted) cannot fathom it. "You know, I don't really fucking know what it is — and it's the same when people ask about performance... I don't really know. When I was four, I just wanted to drive, I collected toy cars. Where does that sort of thing come from? In hindsight you go, 'Oh, I liked it because of this.' Maybe it's just the wheel. Why does a three-year-old, and it's usually boys, want to drive the tractor or have machinery and be in control of it? I don't know." Because it seems grown up? "But why wouldn't you ask to boil a kettle or something? Maybe you would, I dunno."

Putting the kettle on, though, does lack that competitive aspect. Is he competitive by nature? "When it comes to that, yeah, definitely. If I go karting, it's the one thing I would be most competitive at, I think. I'm fairly competitive, we've got a little ping-pong tournament going on in my flat at the moment, which has been an ongoing thing. It was over at a friend's place out in the back garden for the summer. Now it's indoor season and it's just been..." Words fail him temporarily,

but his expression is that of a man sincerely chuffed with something. "I gotta say man, it brought so many hours of just pure joy, that little table. It's a *miniature* ping-pong table."

Prior to this revelation I have, I admit, been visualising a proper one. "No, no," he says, the better to underwrite the scale of joy received from it, "it's not full sized." Keeping a sense of proportion, it transpires, is something he's good at. "I would say my entire flat would be this big really," he points at the dining room around us — it's about the size of a tennis court. "It's a one-bedroom studio, a little bigger but not much." Perhaps significantly his flat is in London. For all that must presumably be on offer to him, he is by no means in thrall to the wild transatlantic possibilities of his position.

Grounded, at least for the moment, by European roots and miniature ping-pong, he has a keen eye for the potential perils of ascension. At the back of the hotel restaurant, in some kind of demented aesthetic gesture, there is a wrought iron spiral staircase which leads nowhere at all. "Maybe I should get one of those," he jokes. "I don't have a staircase, I'm thinking about that, the illusion that there's something upstairs."

How long, though, can all this hold? Success at this level is seldom conducive to small flats and bright, easygoing demeanours. And what sets Fassbender apart in the flesh, aside from the charisma that serves him so well on screen, is that he seems to be having a great time. He is funny, good company, intellectually curious and passionate about his work. There is nothing of the tortured artist about him. Does he worry that through success certain pressures, temptations or opportunities might push him into being a different sort of person?

"Always. It's like anything you know, it's always the same. There's no point thinking, 'Well my life's certainly worked out, I've got all the answers.' It would be wrong for me to say that I don't get seduced by certain things. That things don't become tempting."

For instance what?

"Well, you know, sort of, money! How much money does one need? Let's start with that, that's a pretty good one. So, that, you know. Greed, things like that. Vanity, believing the hype. You have to keep an eye on those things."

How do you do that?

"There's another side of me that's very simple. I keep my lifestyle pretty simple and my possessions are pretty simple. I don't have a very complicated bank balance, but that's not the only thing. How does anyone do it? You make sure you've got a good network of friends, I like to hang around with good people, I like to work

You have been watching: *Jane Eyre* (2011); *X-Men: First Class* (2011); *A Dangerous Method* (2011)



"I like to go out. I wouldn't say I don't enjoy a drink. I'm sociable"



OPPOSITE Mélange skinny rib cotton and silk knitted top, £380, by Gucci. Blue denim jeans, £89, by G-Star

with good people, I've realised that. I don't necessarily like the idea of suffering through a job, it doesn't have to be a torturous environment. I've worked with great people that are very, sort of 'light' — their personalities on set."

There is, though, an abiding rumour (though not one that appears connected to any discernible fact) that he has a hedonistic streak, that off

camera he's involved in some kind of decadent half-life. "What?" he laughs, "Like wrestling pigs?" Maybe. It can't be as simple as playing ping-pong in a small flat, surely? There must be something more exotic going on. "Yeah, people will want to create the characters that they want to create... I'm a pretty sociable person. So if I go out, I like to go dancing. I like to dance..." He kind of catches himself as he says this, aware that it sounds like he's on *Blind Date*. "I like to dance."

Ha! You know, I enjoy myself when I go out. When we were in Berlin and I went out with my parents, we were out till three in the morning, we were all out dancing."

That doesn't really count though, going out late with your parents. "Well, they like to have a good time. And then I suppose there were recent photos of me being 'carried out' of a party. Anybody who knows what a piggyback looks like knows that [was what happened]. But it's an idea of what people want to represent. It's more interesting isn't it, if I've got a hedonistic dark side? Or if there's something else other than a relatively normal guy that goes and... I don't know. I like to go out. I wouldn't say I don't enjoy a drink. As I say, I'm a sociable person."

Do you have to consider that more now you're famous, becoming the centre of attention in what would ordinarily be an unremarkable situation? "The thing is I don't like to filter my behaviour, you know what I mean? If I wanna have a laugh, I don't wanna be worried that it's gonna end up in the papers the next day — and it's not that that's happened to me much, but I have a feeling that might be the case now... I don't want to be in the newspapers. I just want to keep what I do on screen and that's it."

Though everybody these days has a camera, you wonder if his doing such visceral work on screen offsets any media intrusion? It's not like he's playing unblemished people. If you're up there starving (*Hunger*) and masturbating into mirrors (*Shame*), then falling out of a bar, it can't compete. It doesn't cut it. You're beyond the realm of rumour. "Exactly, exactly. But, I know what you mean about everything being recorded now. I did this skydive recently, and there's the option to get it filmed. Anyway, I chose not to, and of course it's a great thing to have, later you look back and go, 'Wasn't it great?' But sometimes it's just good to experience things without having to record it."

Talk of the camera phone takes us on to its use at gigs, and from there to music itself. As a younger man, he was in a heavy-metal band. >

Is that a genre that appeals today? "I still listen to Slayer, man! I just put them on the other day, still listen to Metallica. AC/DC's brilliant... If you're a little bit hungover, put on AC/DC, it's like there's no room for [the hangover] any more, the anxiety's all gone. You're getting on with it. Great rock'n'roll band. Guns N' Roses — *Appetite for Destruction*, great rock'n'roll album. Iron Maiden! I still listen to some choice Iron Maiden songs. What I loved about Maiden [you know he's serious now, no casual fan would refer to them simply as "Maiden"], it was the theatre behind it all, 'Alexander the Great' and shit, Macedonia. It's funny, you can laugh at it, but you can get really into it at the same time." Does he use music to get himself into a mood for acting? "I used to do it a lot. In fact, that was my main key at drama school, but I don't really do it anymore." What changed?

"Now I think I'm a little bit more relaxed in my technique. Now I just try to focus and relax."

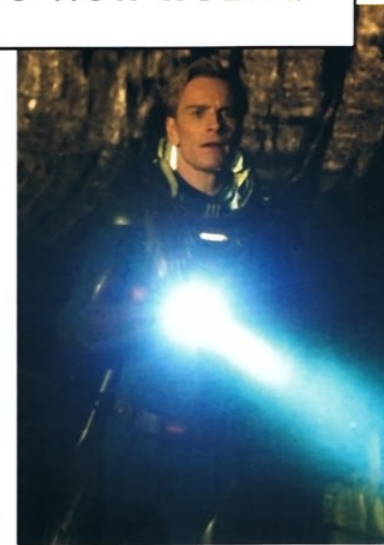
After a brief tobacco interlude in which like any right-thinking person he laments the economic ruin that passes for modernity — "You hope the next generation will think, jeez, they fucked that up, let's do things differently" — we repair indoors and endeavour to shift the debate back from Iron Maiden and towards his latest movie. He's watched *Alien*? "Of course. But I didn't revisit it before we did this. Sometimes I would do that, like for the *Jane Eyre* thing [last year he was Rochester in a much-admired adaptation], I did watch lots of Rochesters, but in this case I didn't. I watched *Blade Runner*, though, I took a look at Sean Young and Rutger Hauer. I love Rutger Hauer in that. Jeez, that's great. With *Prometheus*, it stands alone to *Alien*, the way they put it, and... a good description, is that there's DNA strands that link the two. But it's a whole new world. I play a guy called David who's an android, so that's why I watched *Blade Runner*, there's something in those androids."

He is standing on some noble android shoulders in the *Alien* franchise — Ian Holm and Lance Henriksen having already delivered some outstanding performances. "Yeah, I know. What I was trying to play with, if you programme something, do the programmes start making their own links to each other, to other sort of spark points or link points? Do they start to develop personality traits of a human? If they're designed to respond quite human-like but without the emotion, is there the chance that they will start to develop some quite human personality traits? Insecurity, the feeling of being left out, because they know that they're not the same as human beings? It's the same thing between humans and the gods. Before there was 'one God' there was the idea that the gods looked down on the humans and there was a certain amount of jealousy towards the humans. The idea of mortality."

Alienation: Fassbender in *Shame* (2011); and coming up, *Prometheus* (2012)



"DNA links Alien and Prometheus. But this is a whole new world"



OPPOSITE Cream cotton henley, £100, by Polo Ralph Lauren

Beyond *Prometheus*, Fassbender is confirmed to make another picture, *Twelve Years a Slave*, with director Steve McQueen (*Hunger*, *Shame*), and there is talk (though not from him) that he will work with Ridley Scott again on Cormac McCarthy's screenplay *The Counselor* — which should be something to behold if it happens. In the meantime, he says he is on a self-imposed hiatus, "You have to see it clearly as looking after yourself. There is the danger of burning out here and getting lost and just becoming uninterested."

Though he may not be acting, he is by no means planning to remain idle. "The next thing is to develop, make my own stories with writers, gather a pool of creative people and develop stuff. So it's not the fact that I'm waiting for someone else to hire me or I'm waiting for a really good script to arrive, I'm actually trying to make that script. There's no point in complaining about it unless you... It's hard to fucking make a film or write a script, it's easy to sit back and criticise it, you know?"

After an hour of conversation, it's worth repeating how at ease Fassbender seems with himself. Not just by actor standards, but by anyone's. For one who plays distress with such conviction, he just doesn't seem a troubled individual.

"No, I don't think I am. I have my troubles like anyone else. But you keep a realism, put AC/DC on, get over it, keep positive. I'm a big believer in contributing. Sometimes you sit down at a table, you're just knackered, you've got nothing to say and it's best not to try and fill the air with rubbish. But if you've got something to contribute, you should get something back out. You don't always. Sometimes you get something back and it's great, other times you just won't, but you've gotta keep moving, you can't ever lay down and go, 'Oh God, me.' We're so damn lucky as well, our parents or grandparents having to go to war, the fact that we can jump on a plane and go anywhere like that!" He snaps his fingers. "We eat food readily, without thought... That was the one thing when I did the diet for *Hunger*, again it was like jeez, take stuff away and I felt so appreciative, I was like God, I'm lucky to be alive. It's amazing when you take certain things away. It's like if you hurt your lower back and then you realise — I've been walking around just taking my back for granted. A simple thing like turning a tap on, putting a sock on — agony. The days when the sock goes on painlessly are great. But then you forget again." He laughs. "And then you're back to taking risks with your socks."

On a sartorial point, he is sporting a small bear badge on his lapel. The logo of the Berlin International Film Festival, which he attended. It's an apposite symbol I suggest, given that he too appears to know the value of hibernation. "You've got the end for your article now," he observes correctly. If you're in it for the long haul you have to go back to the cave now and again, stick on some loud music and play a bit of table tennis. Then come out hungry, and give 'em hell. **F** *Prometheus* is out on June 8