



The baddest guy in movies... Not content with kicking lumps out of Robert Downey Jr's Sherlock Holmes, Mark Strong also plays arch villains in Kick-Ass and Nottingham. Total Film sits down to...

MEET SHERLOCK'S NEMESIS

WORDS **MATT MUELLER** PORTRAITS **ALEX LAKE**

For any character actor worth his saline content, being the best thing in a bad film is like plugging fish in a barrel. Being the best thing in a good film, however, is a significantly more noteworthy feat, and that's the realm that Mark Strong currently occupies. Oozing menace, murk or outright malice, Strong's recent cavalcade of slippery, shady operators – from light-mutant Pinbacker in *Sunshine* to Archie in *RocknRolla* and Jordanian intelligence chief Hani in *Body Of Lies* – have put filmmakers on high alert to the 45-year-old Londoner's abundant talents.

Since he registered in Polanski's *Oliver Twist*, Ritchie's *Revolver* and Gaghan's *Syriana*, Strong's been softly ticking away, racking up 17 roles in four years – with only a couple of duds among them. So, how does Strong account for his own rapid rise? "I wanted to get into doing movies after doing a lot of theatre and television," he says simply. "It seemed to me a logical next step to take. I made the choice to turn down TV and

wait for movies. I just got onto the lists, basically, and then I had some successes. The combination of *Oliver Twist* and *Syriana* coming out at the same time allowed people to see two completely different performances by the same actor. I had a meeting with the Coen brothers for *No Country For Old Men* specifically because they'd seen those two films."

Strong got down to the final two to play Anton Chigurh but, contrary to interweb geekgas-ming, he didn't turn down the cattle gun-wielding psycho role that Javier Bardem spun into Oscar gold because his wife was about to have their second child. "The film I originally turned down was *Body Of Lies*," he explains. "In fact I was phoned one weekend and told, 'Listen, Javier's dates won't work,' so for a few days I was thinking, 'Wow, I'm actually going to work with the Coen brothers.' I'm appalled that rumour is out there because it makes me out to be a complete idiot. Like, why the hell would you turn that part down? I would kneel on broken glass to work with them." >>



'There's a touch of Dracula about Lord Blackwood'

Even though his date with the Coens didn't pan out, Strong's career has still ratcheted up multiple notches. "I suppose an element of good fortune must be my taste," he observes. "I'm by no means doing solely the work available. I have to make choices about which thing I want to do and which one I want to turn down. But I just know what I like and that's borne out by the fact that I've been making movies that have been getting noticed." Strong also knows that he's surfing a wave of good fortune. "It feels exhilarating. I'm working with directors who are at the top of their game."

As if any further proof were needed, Strong is speaking down the blower to *Total Film* from Bulgaria, where he's about to start shooting Peter Weir's *The Way Back*, the true story of two Soviet prisoners who escaped their gulag by walking to Mongolia. "If you look at the films he's made, most of them I would list as favourite films of mine," says Strong, playing an inmate alongside Colin Farrell and Ed Harris. "The chance to work with him was unturndownable."

Strong was born Marco Giuseppe Salussolia to an Italian father and Austrian mother, but the former walked out when he was a child while the latter changed his name by deed poll. "People think Mark Strong's a stage name but it's not; it's served me well," he says. The first-generation Brit endured his share of youthful tribulations, spending time in a school for difficult children before reading law in Munich. After drama school



Pride and prejudice: (above) Strong in *The Young Victoria*.

and board-treading at the RSC and the National, Strong landed his on-screen break at the ripe old age of 33 in *Our Friends Of The North*, opposite Daniel Craig, godfather to his elder son Gabriel. "It's been fascinating watching his career and to see the level at which he now functions as a movie star," he marvels. "He realised much sooner than I did that being in the movies was the way to go."

Craig sounded off with nearly all his close friends about whether or not to accept the Bond offer, including Strong. "I just said, "There's no way you can turn it down because you will always think that could have been me."

Sound advice, and Strong himself has never been wary of embracing the commercial side of filmmaking, including his most important role yet as Sherlock Holmes' nemesis in Ritchie's multiplex-buster. For this master of complex villainy, even Strong admits that Lord Blackwood – an occult-dabbling Satanist loosely based on Alastair Crowley – is "just dastardly and evil".

"There's a touch of Dracula about him," he muses. "He needed to have an element of showmanship about him by virtue of the fact that he's trying to persuade everyone around him that he's so in league with the Devil that he's able to conquer

death. I just wanted to make him an equal adversary of Sherlock Holmes."

And is he? Does Lord Blackwood get to kick Holmes' ass? "Yeah, absolutely. There's a fantastic sequence where we duel to the death on a half-built Tower Bridge. It's a perfect way to end the movie, Robert and I hammering seven bells out of each other on top of this swinging bridge with Victorian London as a backdrop. It's going to be amazing."

Before *Sherlock Holmes*, Strong will be seen as chief super-creep in Matthew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass* and, this month, deploying more strong-arm tactics in *The Young Victoria* as Sir John Conroy, scheming oppressor of Emily Blunt's pre-Queen Victoria. When he returns from the bleak winter steppes of Bulgaria, Strong will dive straight into Ridley Scott's *Nottingham* and he's looking forward to working on a more extensive basis with Russell Crowe. The night that Strong arrived in Morocco for the *Body Of Lies* shoot (after his

wife convinced him he was crazy to turn the film down) was the day after the birth of his second son, Roman, and Crowe insisted on taking him out to celebrate. "He came off a lot better than I did at the end of the evening," chuckles Strong.

Playing the Sheriff of Nottingham's right-hand man marks another sinister notch on a CV already packed with porn kings, sadistic killers and brutal henchmen... Does he ever see himself tiring of the dark side?

"What I like about the characters I've played is the fact that they're not all necessarily evil, they just have something about them that makes them a little bit dangerous. That's more interesting to me than your average straightforward hero."

Not to say that Strong isn't up for playing a heroic lead. He feels he might get his chance soon, that 2009 "is going to have some interesting opportunities... I'm having an amazing ride at the moment but I'm long enough in the tooth to realise that it can all go quiet again very quickly. I'm just taking it as it comes." **TF**

The Young Victoria is out now and was reviewed last issue. Kick-Ass opens over the summer; Sherlock Holmes on 13 November; and Nottingham 2010. All will be reviewed in future issues.