

BEN WHISHAW

HE'S BRILLIANTLY PLAYED LOUCHE ARISTOCRATS AND SCENTED KILLERS, AND HE MAKES A SOPHISTICATED 19TH-CENTURY ROMANTIC POET IN BRIGHT STAR. BUT BRITAIN'S BEST YOUNG ACTOR STILL CAN'T SHAKE THE DOUBTS. "SOMETIMES," HE CONFESSES, "I FEEL LIKE A FUCKING FAILURE..."

PHOTOGRAPHY TOYIN FASHION EDITOR LUKE DAY WORDS MATT MUELLER

Trailing his publicist across the outdoor terrace of a smart Toronto hotel, Ben Whishaw could easily be mistaken for the skinny, waifish frontman of a cool new indie band rather than one of Britain's finest young actors. The city's flashy film festival is in full swing and, with Whishaw embarking on the North American leg of his Bright Star tour (he plays celebrated 19th-century Romantic poet John Keats in Jane Campion's film), it's been established as our ideal meeting place.

The long-limbed actor greets me with a warm smile and light handshake, saying he just passed Terry Gilliam on his way in. Hair styled in dark, artful swoops, framing a face highlighted by intense, emotive eyes and near-flawless skin, Whishaw's more strikingly handsome in person than he appears on screen, although since he's usually portraying individuals locked in some degree of anguish, perhaps that's to be expected. He's wearing a dark leather jacket that tapers to stretchy rib-knit fabric around his wrists and neck. It's not cold, but he keeps it zipped up to the very top during our hour-long conversation like a protective shield.

Ordering black coffee, he's sedate and contained although he insists his life is ruled by nervous energy (and he does fiddle with a chocolate wrapping paper like a crinkly stress reliever). He's also convivial, thoughtful, grins a lot... and more than once deflects a query that might penetrate too far into his privacy. (When asked about his twin brother James, Whishaw tells

me he "does something with finance but he's on his own journey which I can't go into.") I get the sense that everything Ben Whishaw wants to reveal about himself lies on screen in his intuitive and often remarkable performances – and he'd rather let them do all the talking.

The 28-year-old actor has already played several substantial and substantive roles. On stage, upon graduating from RADA in 2004, he waltzed straight into Trevor Nunn's Old Vic production of Hamlet, sparking critical raptures for his haunting performance; on film, he stepped into the global limelight as scent-obsessed killer Grenouille in Perfume: The Story of a Murderer, before delivering his incarnation of Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes's I'm Not There and pouting aristocrat Sebastian Flyte in last year's *Brideshead Revisited*. As Keats, Whishaw is a fragile, bedridden hero forging a romantic (and ultimately tragic) bond with Abbie Cornish's Fanny Brawne – literally the girl next door. It's another role that draws deeply from the well of Whishaw's sensual, compelling charisma – and although the actor admits he wanted more of the poet's passionate anger to come through, he ultimately embraced Campion's vision.

On the horizon, he's also playing wayward sprite Ariel in Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* and is waiting to hear whether Kill your Darlings, a Beat-poets biopic in which he's due to play Lucien Carr, finds its money. Taymor also approached Ben about playing Peter Parker in her

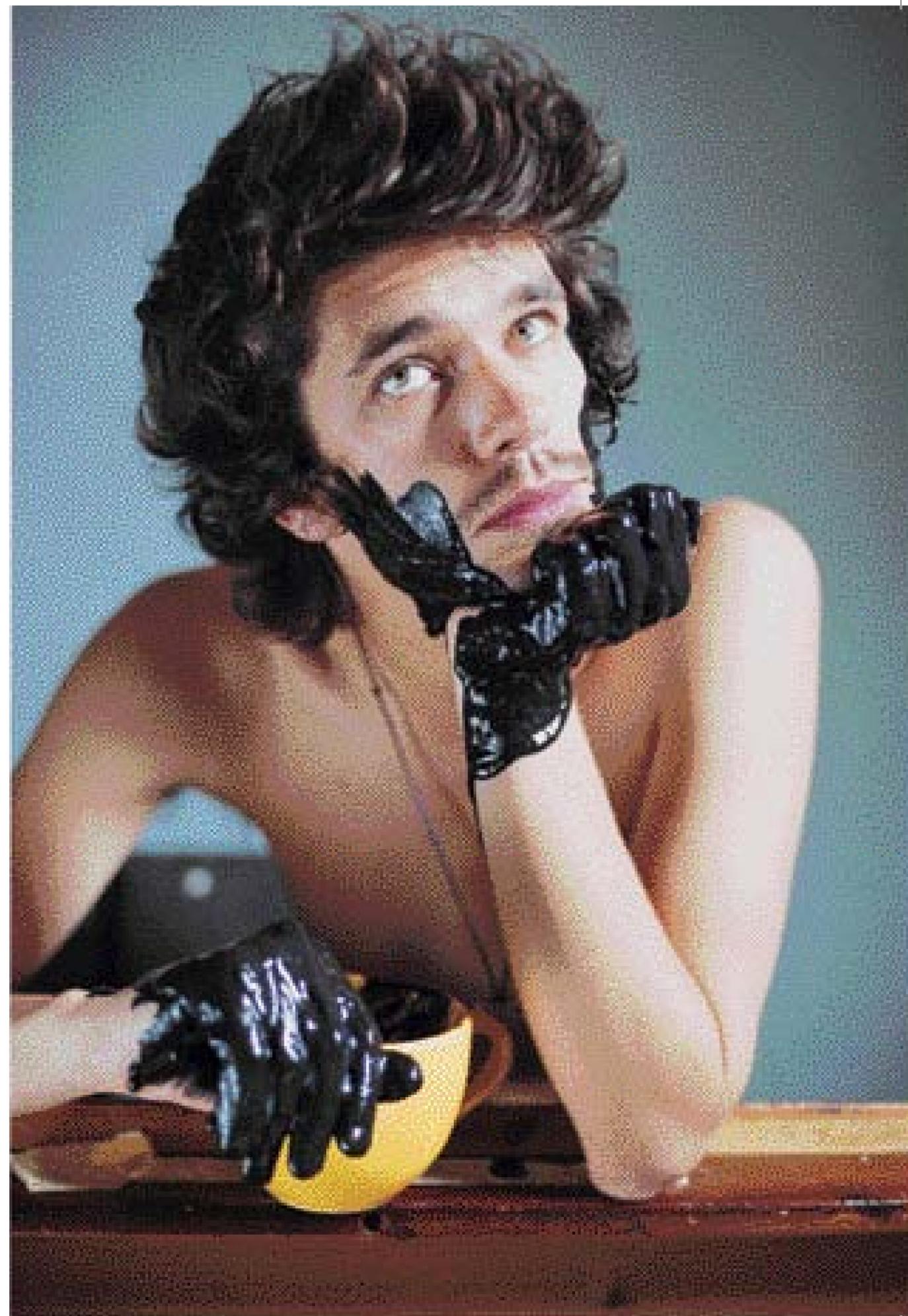
Spiderman musical on Broadway, but he declined, claiming his singing voice wasn't strong enough – although you suspect it's not the sort of role he'd ever relish playing. For now, though, there are several more Star turns to put in, as Whishaw prepares to head to New York and LA as soon as the Toronto gig finishes. "I'm doing a bit of a slog," he proclaims. "But it's all good..."

Matt Mueller: I've spoken to actors who say that Jane Campion really puts you through the ringer before deciding if you're right for a role. Did she do that to you?

Ben Whishaw: I'd heard that too, that she'd have to see you quite a few times before she'd make up her mind. But I did one audition that was an hour long. I actually didn't think that I'd got the part. I thought that Jane was much more interested in the actress I was auditioning opposite. So I just thought, "Oh, I'm here really just to deliver lines." I decided that that's what was going on quite early on in the audition and then just relaxed because I thought, 'Okay, this is not gonna happen.' [Laughs] I was really surprised when it did...

MM: So Abbie Cornish wasn't the actress you auditioned with...

BW: No, we got cast separately. You would have thought that Jane would want to see if there was the possibility of any chemistry between us. But she didn't. I think that says a lot about Jane. She has intuitions about people that are uncanny.





If anything, she seemed to take pains to keep us apart for a long time. We only met on the first day of rehearsal.

MM: Did you immerse yourself in Keats?

BW: I got interested even beyond the part. I read lots of things that were not of much relevance to the film but I just became very, very interested in him and in that period and how his work's been perceived through the ages. I had a desk piled with Keats' books of one kind or another.

MM: Did you plough your way through his work?

BW: Yes, and some of them are, uh... he wrote this very strange piece called *The Cap and the Bells* not long before he died, which is very difficult to read! [Laughs] He was really sporadic. He'd have a flash of some genius and then he'd write something eccentrically bad, in my opinion. His best work seemed to be the stuff he dismissed himself, not thinking it was worth very much, and the work that he toiled over is the stuff that's sort of been forgotten.

MM: What marked out the bad stuff?

BW: You can tell that he's trying to be a bit like Shakespeare. He's not being true to himself. That's my impression. But the amount he wrote in such a short life is utterly mind-boggling. He was living life at a real pitch. And he was surrounded by death. I'm sure in some sub-conscious place he knew he wasn't going to live to be an old man.

MM: What was your favourite Keats poem?

BW: The one I love best is *Ode to A Nightingale*. I was just looking at it again this morning because when I was at Cannes I got asked to recite poetry on the spot and I crumbled under the pressure. So I was in the shower this morning and I thought, "I'd better refresh some poetry". So I was re-reading *Ode To A Nightingale* and it seemed to be a different poem to the one I remember, you know? I think all great work does that – it changes as you change or you change with it, or whatever happens.

MM: And did anyone ask you to recite today?

BW: No, actually! I was going to recite the bit about death. The least pretty part...

MM: Do you always do heavy research into a character? Is it something you need to get under the skin of your character?

BW: It depends on what it is. Sometimes I like to go on pure instinct for something. Sometimes it's essential to get the facts right.

MM: What roles have you played on instinct alone? The killer in *Perfume*, perhaps?

BW: Yeah, I guess. It's funny, research. People mean lots of different things by it. I started to do a part about fence builders [in *Pawel Pawlikowski's* abandoned *The Restraint of Beast*] and we all went and became fence builders. That's one kind of research. But there's another kind where you can draw on anything to help you, like a painting or a piece of music... You open yourself up to everything and it's interesting what becomes useful to you in the portrayal.

MM: How did you approach the role in *Perfume*?

BW: I was thinking a lot about animals, and about autistic people. I don't think I did any research about smelling or perfumes.

MM: Do you like directors to instruct you what to look at?

BW: I love that. Todd Haynes gave everyone quite specific material to look at and listen to on I'm Not There. He gave me an audiotape of the San Francisco 65-66 interviews – God, Dylan was such a genius interviewee. But Todd's beautiful also because then he just left us to get on with it. We didn't rehearse at all; I just turned up and did it.

MM: How was your experience of making *Bright Star*?

BW: Jane spent a lot of time just encouraging me to relax... [laughs] sort of stroking me and just sitting with me. 'Just nice and relaxed' – that's what she kept saying to me.

MM: Did you feel on edge?

BW: I have a fair amount of nervousness that sometimes is useful and sometimes is not. I don't think he's a nervous character – in the way that I'm nervous, anyway – so it was getting rid of something that was blocking us.

MM: Did you and Abbie keep your distance once you met?

BW: Yeah, we did. Not intentionally. We were very supportive of each other and we'd share cigarettes together. In rehearsal, Jane wanted us to bring in a love offering every day, like a letter, a poem, a flower... we had to express our love for each other as often as we could through some sort of gift so that fostered an attitude between us. I've still got a CD Abbie made me. But we were also pretty private and I think that was good. It's just the way it worked out but it wasn't complicated by anything else.

MM: Does it depend on the character you're playing how close you get to your co-stars?

BW: Yeah. It depends on the other actor too.

MM: Didn't you and Matthew Goode become good friends making *Brideshead Revisited*?

BW: I've not seen Matthew for a long time but, yeah, I am good friends with him.

MM: What were you like making that film?

BW: I was pretty tense actually! [Laughs] It was one of those shoots where there seemed to be a lot against us. It was the wettest summer in England, ever. Then I was supposed to be in a motor car but they had to give the motor car back so that had to be cut. I remember it being quite fraught but not unhappy. Lots of fun with Emma Thompson. She's a great bringer-together-er of people. She's one of my strongest memories of making that film.

MM: *Brideshead* got battered by the critics. Had you harboured any doubts before saying yes about playing a role as iconic as Sebastian Flyte?

BW: Rightly or wrongly, I didn't really. I loved the part and I thought I could bring something to it, which is all I ever go on. But it's very hard to

adapt things when your audience has a memory of something which they adore. They don't want something to get in the way of that memory.

Maybe it's an interesting movie for another generation... I've noticed that a lot of teenage girls really love Sebastian. I've had quite a few 15, 16-year-olds stop me in the street.

MM: Maybe they identify with Sebastian's awkwardness...

BW: I think so. And the feeling that he's rebelling against his mother.

MM: Your version made the gay relationship between Sebastian and Charles more overt than the book or the TV version. Was that a good idea?

BW: Yes, I think it was good for the story. It's so frustrating because the novel is so full of incident and can linger on things; it's incredibly subtle and fine. Which of course you can achieve over 15 weeks of a television series quite beautifully.

You need to make a strong decision about something in the condensing down so I thought it was a good thing to make it more overt. But maybe some of the ambiguity and the richness of the novel was lost in the process.

MM: Did you and Matthew ever hold a *Brideshead* post-mortem?

BW: No, we never have. Well, sort of... you always have a time of reflecting on what you've done and you're never happy – at least I'm not happy with what I've done. I tend just to forget about it once it's done and then you move onto the next thing knowing it was an utter failure. But there you go. [laughs] It's healthy. It keeps you moving on.

MM: Is it coincidence that you've appeared in three films with Daniel Craig, or are you friends? You made *The Trench*, your very first film, then *Layer Cake* and *Enduring Love*...

BW: Oh God, I was so young. I don't know Daniel Craig at all. It's purely coincidence. I don't think he would even remember me. We barely exchanged a conversation, particularly on the first film. I think I was about 17 and really timid, really shy. I don't think I spoke to him. I was too frightened...

MM: And by the time you got to *Enduring Love*?

BW: A little bit, maybe. [laughs]

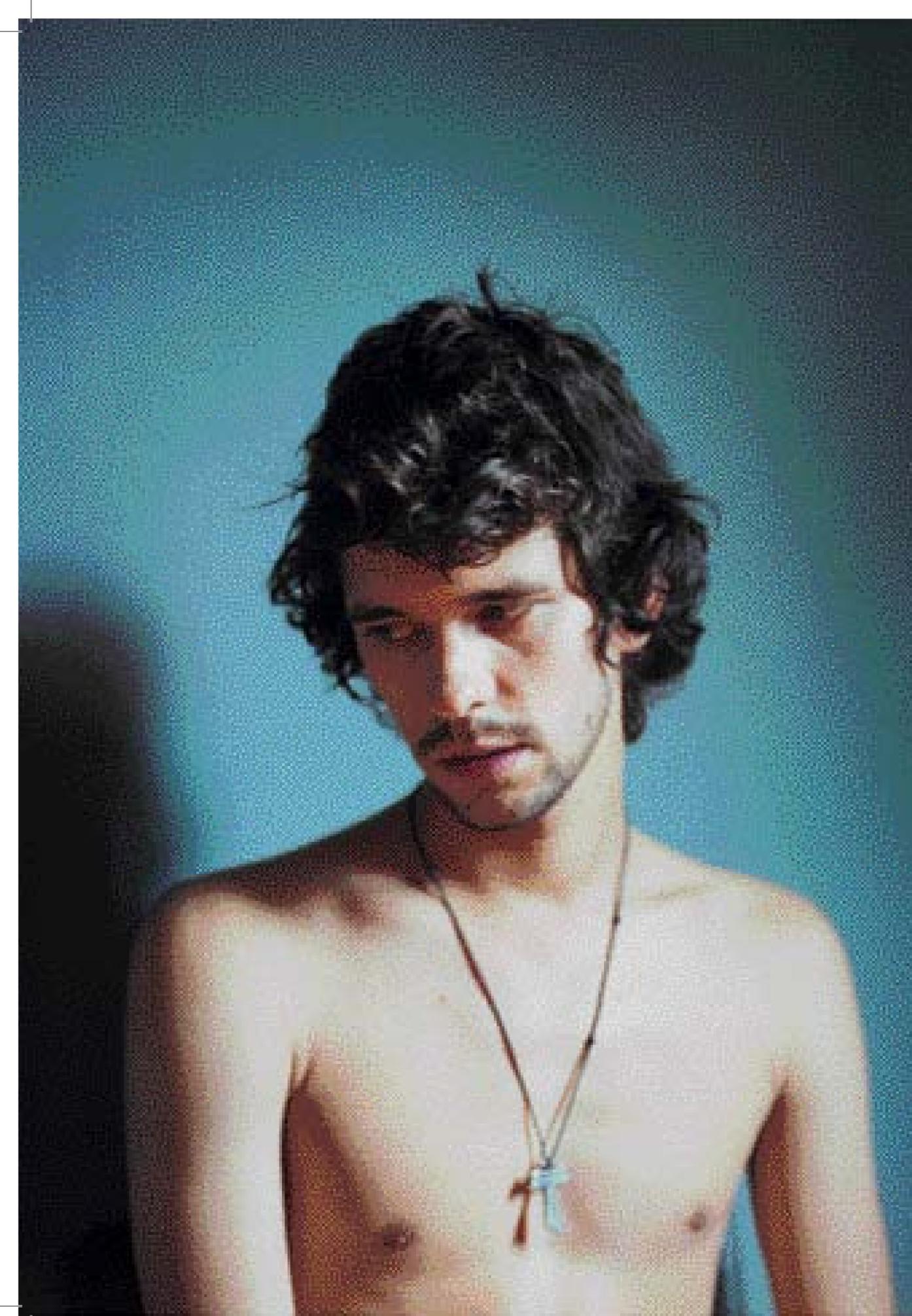
MM: Many of the characters you play are intense types – passionate, tormented, a bit twitchy perhaps... Are they the roles you enjoy most?

Whishaw looks momentarily mortified and takes his time answering, gazing into the fixed distance over my shoulder with a slightly stricken look in his eyes... "Yeahhhh," he drawls. He starts laughing, but it's laughter with an edge to it. It occurs to me that the word 'twitchy' hasn't gone down well with an actor as palpably sensitive as Whishaw...

BW: Um... Yeah, it's funny... it's very strange when people start saying, 'You're this.' Because you don't have any notion of what you are. You don't have eyes outside of yourself, looking at yourself.

DARK GREY CARDIGAN AND GREY SLEEVELESS TOP BY PRADA.
COTTON MILITARY CARDIGAN BY MIHARAYASUHIRO. RIPPED
JEANS BY DOLCE & GABBANA. TOP HAT BY JAMES LOCK & CO





So it's not the way I view myself. And it's not something that I'm trying to do... Dunno.

MM: But would you say that you're mainly drawn to characters who are introspective?

BW: Yeah, definitely. You're drawn to something that you feel like you can bring something of your experience of life to. You want to give some authentic thing of life, don't you? You wanna give something pure. I'm looking for roles where I feel like there can be a marriage between you and the part and you can reveal something. And, yeah, I s'pose they have been intense and 'twitchy'.

Whishaw creases up in laughter, chortling harder and louder than any other moment in our conversation. I join in, relieved he's seeing the humorous side but still anxious that I've hurt his feelings, or that he thinks I've just reduced his entire career down to one unflattering word. I fumble about explaining that I meant he's so good at conveying pain and passion in characters who rarely seem comfortable in their own skin...

BW: [distracted, but still laughing] 'Intense and twitchy actor.'

MM: Are you annoyed?

BW: No, not at all. I understand how these things come about.

MM: So do you consider yourself to be a highly sensitive person?

BW: Yes and no. I think I could be more sensitive and sometimes I think I'm too sensitive.

MM: In what situations are you too sensitive?

BW: Um... I don't know. I guess it's too difficult to go into that.

MM: Does it ever make your job difficult?

BW: I think the thing I've got to get better at is not so much the sensitive thing; I think I can use that well. But I have this kind of reaction if something's gone badly to just wanna go, [puts on an miserable voice] 'Oh fuck it... it's all going to shit and I'm a fucking failure.' It's something I've observed in myself, this kind of destructive thing. 'Chuck it all away... Fuck it all'. [laughs] Which I think is not so good. It's just energy I need to get rid of but I can quite quickly go into this negative space. And that's not helpful for working.

MM: Is it hard to lift yourself out of that mood?

BW: I always get out of it... I'm trying to write a film about the church and I've been reading the Bible and there's a line in the Bible about, 'Don't let the sun go down on your anger.' And I think about that. Like, you can be angry or frustrated with yourself but try and let it go. I just go with the feeling but try not to cling on to it for too long.

MM: That's a weighty topic to take on, a film about the church.

BW: [Laughs] Yeah. I don't really know what it's gonna be yet. I don't think of myself as a writer... I can't really write at all actually. But there's a story I would quite like to tell, but I think I probably

need help in the writing of it.

MM: Has religion ever been important to you?

BW: No, I'm just interested in it. I'm interested in the idea of having a faith, beyond what we can see.

MM: Do you have that?

BW: Yeah, I think I do. But I don't think I could ever embrace any particular religion.

MM: Fame seems to have usurped religion in modern life. What's your attitude towards it?

BW: I don't even think about it. I'm fairly certain it's not something that's gonna ever happen to me.

“ I WAS NAKED, APART FROM A LITTLE JOCKSTRAP, my eyebrows were shaved off and I was given breasts AND ENORMOUS WINGS ”

MM: That's what most actors say...

BW: Oh really? Well, it's just not a part of my life. If people stop you, that's a really gratifying thing, because they've been touched in some way or you've had some impact upon them which is lovely. But nothing beyond that ever happens to me.

MM: What made you want to become an actor?

BW: I don't know. I've always dressed up and created little characters, stories and performances. And I've just carried on doing that, really. I thought I'd go to art school and I started an course but then I gave it up after a couple of weeks and went to drama school instead. It was quite clear to me.

MM: You'd already made a couple of films before you went to RADA...

BW: I had, but I really wanted to do theatre. As a teenager, that's what I loved watching most. I didn't really watch many films and I wasn't especially interested in them. I loved going to the theatre and I loved watching theatre actors. That

was what I wanted to do so it's been a surprise to me to be involved in making films and finding that I really love it. In the last couple of years I've been trying to educate myself about films. I have this American agent and when she came to London, she asked me what films I liked and I couldn't name anything. She said, 'You've got to educate yourself' and I took her on her word. Now I really love film. MM: What did you educate yourself with? Not Michael Bay movies, I trust...

BW: No! I love Tarkovsky, I love Bergman. Jane introduced me to Bresson and Cassavetes. And I'm just discovering Jim Jarmusch. There seems to be a lack of daring in some films that are being made now and I'm just so intrigued as to how artists like Tarkovsky made their films.

MM: When you came out of RADA, you played Hamlet straight off the bat. It's the role that every actor wants to play at some point in their life and you've already crossed it off the list...

BW: It was about eight months after I'd left college. I was doing a play at the National Theatre where I was playing a bear and a witch. And then I got Hamlet.

MM: You were in His Dark Materials at the National!? Playing a bear?

BW: [laughs] Yeah, I was a few parts. One of them was a bear and one was a witch. There was a gaggle of witches, all played by women, and because they were a bit short on women and I was very skinny – still am – they dragged me in to being a witch.

MM: Did you enjoy it?

BW: It was one of the most humiliating experiences of my life. I still can't believe that I did it. There were several other guys who were dragged into being witches as well but they were too masculine-looking and were jettisoned. Whereas I was kept on for the entire run.

MM: IMDB lists one of your credits as the Al Pacino version of The Merchant of Venice but I have to confess I couldn't spot you in it...

BW: I don't know what that's about. I'm not in The Merchant of Venice. I got a fan letter once saying, 'We loved your performances in Perfume and The Merchant Of Venice.' Haha! I promise you I'm not in it!

MM: But you are playing Ariel in Julie Taymor's version of Shakespeare's The Tempest, right?

BW: Yes. Julie's an interesting task-master. She'll throw anything at you and expect you to rise to it. Ariel transforms into a harpy so I was naked, apart from a little jockstrap, and painted black, I had my eyebrows shaved off, I was given breasts, these enormous wings. And I had to recite this speech. Julie said, 'Can you do it in double-time cos we're gonna slow it down?' So I was flapping about doing this double-speed speech-ifying. I can understand some people might find that kind of stuff hard, but I loved it. I love that feeling of, 'Come on, we can do everything. We can do anything...'

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