

# MISTER FANTASTIC

It's not easy for actors to switch from TV to movies but Ioan Gruffudd has cracked it. With his new *Fantastic Four* film about to be released, the Welsh star reveals how he's gone from *Hornblower* to Hollywood

WORDS *Matt Mueller* PHOTOGRAPH *Sarah Dunn*

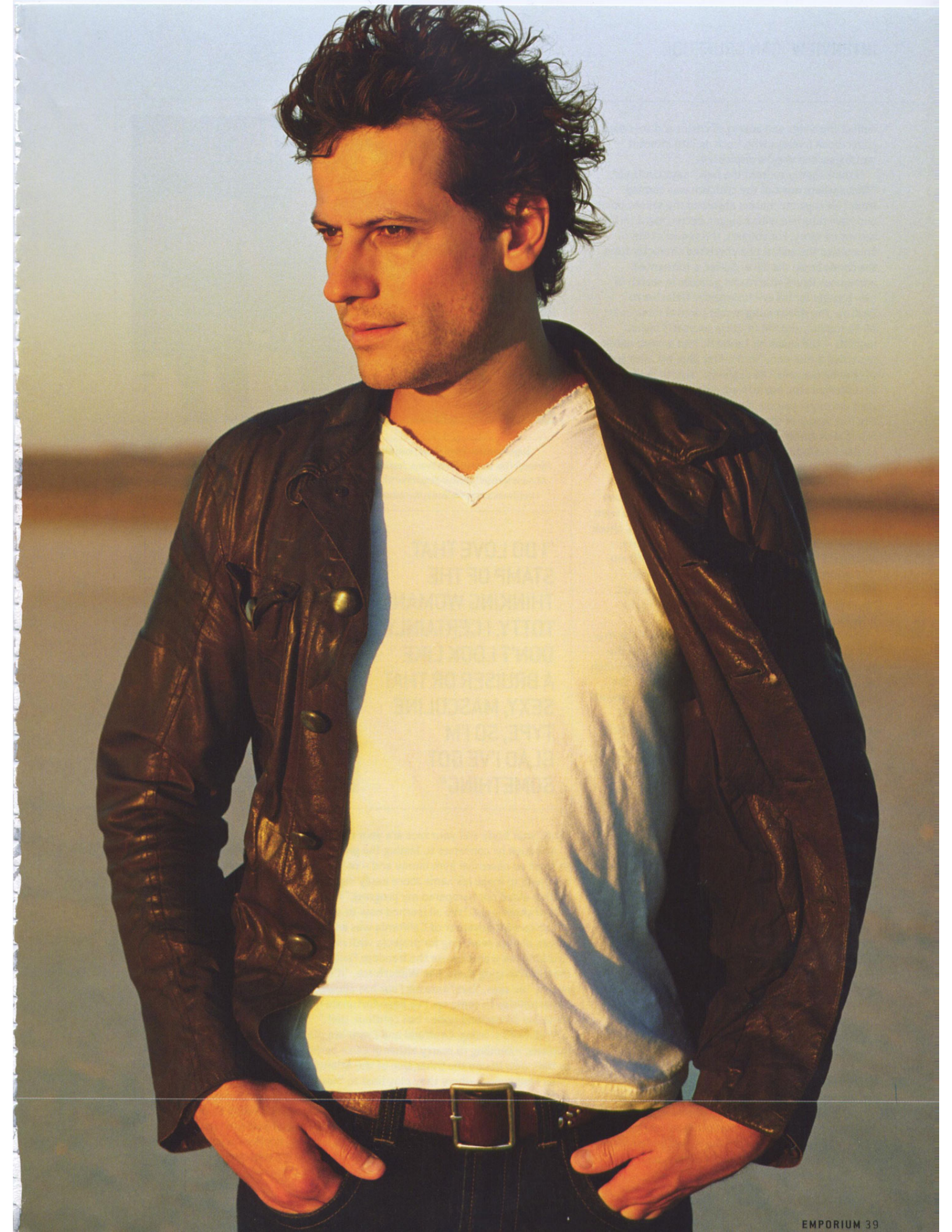
Ever since *Titanic*, where he had a tiny role as the junior officer who rescues Kate Winslet from an icy doom, Ioan Gruffudd's been making regular visits to the film industry's beating heart, Los Angeles. But it wasn't until he moved out there for good in 2003 that his film career really took off. Like any young British actor hoping to break into movies, trips over to LA were a necessary part of the job: meeting the power players, joining the audition assembly line, attempting to translate those small-screen success back home – as Horatio Hornblower in ITV's epic seafaring franchise; as Pip in the BBC's 1999 version of *Great Expectations* – into fully fledged movie stardom.

"Nothing really came to fruition when I was travelling back and forth," says Gruffudd, reclining in a comfy armchair in London's Dorchester Hotel, talking to *Emporium*. "Whether it was something in my attitude or my confidence level, everything changed for me when I moved there. I got a part in a TV series called *Century City*, although it was sadly cancelled after three episodes. Right after that I got *King Arthur* and then *Fantastic Four*. I haven't really stopped since."

It was the former, a flashy update of the Arthurian legend, that Gruffudd feels buried the image of him as the soft-spoken, unassuming Welshman once and for all. Which, in fact, he is when you meet him in person. On screen though, he got the chance to show off other facets of his personality, displaying a tough, swarthy charisma as Lancelot to Clive Owen's King Arthur. And, like fellow Welshman Christian Bale with *Batman Begins*, Gruffudd consolidated his rising status by choosing to play a comic-book superhero in *Fantastic Four*.

Currently back in the UK to squeeze in interviews for the film's sequel, *Fantastic Four: Rise Of The Silver Surfer*, Gruffudd stars as Reed Richards, aka Mr Fantastic, in the blockbuster franchise, a brilliant scientist whose molecular make-up gets scrambled in outer space, giving him the ability to stretch his entire body any which way he wants. Light, comical and family-oriented, the first flick was based on the popular American comic that's been running since 1961 and focused on the origins of the superhero quartet. The group also included Jessica Alba's self-explanatory Invisible Woman, Michael Chiklis's rocky-horror-show *The Thing* and Chris Evan's blazing Human Torch, and became a surprise hit, grossing \$350 million around the world. It defied many people's wildest expectations, including Gruffudd's – but couldn't







## INTERVIEW IOAN GRUFFUDD

deflect the slings and arrows of critics and so-called comic-book fanboys who froth up into internet uprisings when they're displeased.

"I think rightly so from the fans," says Gruffudd. "That's where most of the criticism was coming from." He says the makers absorbed the salient points and have returned with a bigger, better, more thrilling adventure story. For starters, the sequel's title announces the arrival of a cherished character from the comic book: the Silver Surfer, a tormented, ambiguous figure who roams galaxies in search of new planets for his evil taskmaster Galactus to destroy. The shimmering herald's arrival interrupts Mr Fantastic's and the Invisible Woman's lavish nuptials – and snaps Mr Fantastic into a more heroic, proactive dimension. "In the first film, we were sort of chasing our tails," he explains. "This time I feel that Mr Fantastic has arrived. He's not that scientific nerd anymore; you see his evolution into becoming the true leader of the Fantastic Four. And the film is just a lot cooler than the first one."

Ioan Gruffudd was born in Cardiff to parents who were Welsh-language teachers. Music was a big part of his childhood, and he developed into an accomplished singer and musician, playing the oboe in the South Glamorgan Youth Orchestra. If you want evidence of how mellifluous his singing voice is, check him out singing the title hymn in *Amazing Grace*, the recent film about anti-slavery pioneer William Wilberforce, played by Gruffudd. "Being Welsh, we're very proud of our singing heritage," he says. "But I'm sure they had Bryn Terfel waiting in the wings just in case!"

He also caught the acting bug early, appearing in a Welsh soap opera at 13, and winning a place at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art five years later. When he graduated in 1995, he waltzed straight into the leading role in the TV drama *Poldark*, swiftly followed by small roles in *Wilde*, *Titanic* and, of course, his leading-man breakthrough: the maritime adventure series *Hornblower*.

Gruffudd once described Horatio Hornblower, who he played in eight feature-length episodes screened between 1998 and 2003, as a "young man with a bright mind". But it also applies to almost every role he's played, up to and including his superhero-scientist in *Fantastic Four*. "Well, I *am* a young man with a bright mind!" laughs the 33-year-old actor. "No, seriously, my fiancée [his *102 Dalmatians* co-star Alice Evans] says, 'How on earth do you represent these clever characters? If people only knew the truth about you!'"

*Emporium* detects more than a hint of false modesty here. Even his *Amazing Grace* director, Michael Apted, says Gruffudd is no slouch in the intellect department. "I'll have to pay him the 20 bucks later," he quips. "But I do love that stamp of the thinking woman's totty. I certainly don't look like a bruiser or that archetypal, sexy, masculine type so I'm glad I've got something."

Looking good in a ruffled shirt, snug trousers and stepped heels made Gruffudd a genuine heartthrob, with an avid and rather resourceful female following – two American fans once turned up unannounced at his flat; he sweetly invited them in for coffee. This inspired Burberry to make him the face of their men's fragrance Burberry London for Men, with Rachel Weisz. "It is a business and, you



Superhero star: (from above) Ioan with *Fantastic Four* co-stars Chris Evans, Jessica Alba and Michael Chiklis; in *King Arthur* with Clive Owen; and as the lead in *Hornblower*

**"I DO LOVE THAT STAMP OF THE THINKING WOMAN'S TOTTY. I CERTAINLY DON'T LOOK LIKE A BRUISER OR THAT SEXY, MASCULINE TYPE, SO I'M GLAD I'VE GOT SOMETHING"**



know, your body and your face are your tools," says Gruffudd.

Although he confesses to feeling the pressure to stay in shape in Hollywood, he's not an obsessive gym bunny and – to his credit – has always resisted attempts to make his name more easily digestible. "It's who I am, and it has neither aided nor hampered my progress," he said a few years ago, adding with a hint of cheekiness, "We all learned how to say Schwarzenegger."

The current governor of California was an actor who knew how to manage his career, always searching for projects with maximum franchise potential. But for Gruffudd, he wants to use the freedom *Fantastic Four* has given him to search out more challenging parts, like Wilberforce. "It's not that I have an abundance of choice," he says, "but *Fantastic Four* has allowed me time to wait for the right opportunities to come up. I've been fortunate not to have to take the money so far in my career, and hope I can continue that."

While he's waiting, Gruffudd and Evans are planning their own upcoming nuptials, intending to marry either in LA or perhaps on a beach in Mexico – a nod to their new life on the other side of the Atlantic. They recently bought a house in West Hollywood, where they play host to family and friends on a regular basis.

"Almost every weekend there's another famous British actor passing through our doors," he laughs. "I absolutely love it there. It's just a much easier way of life. That's the great thing about it: you *want* to jump out of bed and face the world. I've got a pool in the back garden and a little hot tub. It's like I'm on holiday 24/7, reading scripts and sipping a cocktail in my hot tub. It's ridiculous."