

Wilde Child

Briefly hanging up his sword and spurs between the *Chronicles of Narnia* movies, Ben Barnes has taken on the role of Oscar Wilde's most famous – and most handsome – cad: Dorian Gray. By Matt Mueller

Such is the itinerant life of an actor in demand that Ben Barnes has to cancel our scheduled face-to-face interview in Covent Garden and phone instead from Heathrow. Having wrapped a film in Boston only two days earlier, Barnes had, literally, a 24-hour stopover in London before having to get straight on a plane to Australia, where he'll spend the next five months reprising his role as Prince Caspian in the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise. "I'm in this enormous lounge with not a single other human being in sight; it's a bit creepy," he laughs.

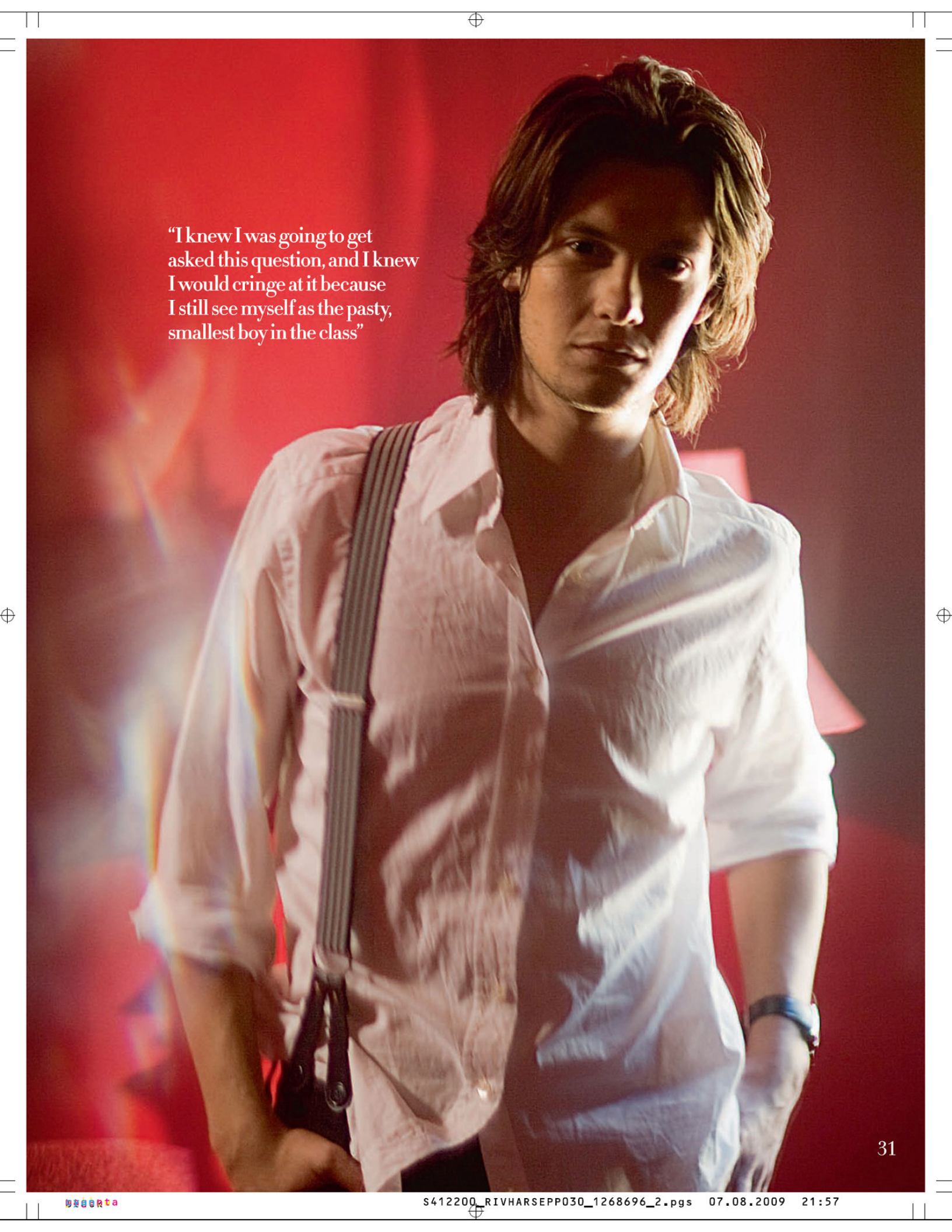
Fitting for the occasion, then, as Barnes is squeezing in this conversation before his flight to Oz to discuss his starring role in *Dorian Gray*, a visceral, churning adaptation of Oscar Wilde's only published novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As the narcissistic, homicidal cad of the title, Barnes delivers a performance that most definitely falls into the 'creepy' category. The role played havoc with Barnes' nerves. Indeed, if there's one thing that defines the 28-year-old actor, it's a propensity for feeling physically ill when it comes to his job. It's a manifestation of anxiety that can overwhelm Barnes, who felt sick most days on the set of *Dorian Gray* – and he still feels queasy now, not having seen the finished film.

Unquestionably, *Dorian Gray* is the riskiest role yet

in Barnes' nascent career, so he has reason to feel anxious. "Playing him is like watching someone jump off a cliff; you just want to avert your eyes from his spiralling self-destruction," he admits. Fortunately, the actor more than acquits himself as Gray, who transforms from a naïve bumpkin into a hedonistic lout drowning in a cesspit of vice. Meanwhile, the portrait painting he hides in his attic reflects his own physical and moral decay even though, in the public eye, he stays forever young.

And, of course, in typical Wildean hyperbole, Gray is hailed as an absolute paragon of male beauty. Surely pressure for any young actor? "I certainly didn't feel the pressure side of it, because I always saw it more as a story about the power of youth and celebrity," he muses. "But I knew I was going to get asked this question, and I knew I would cringe at it because I still see myself as the pasty, smallest boy in the class. I'm working on it – I've been hitting the gym for *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* [the *Narnia* film he's off to shoot]. But I wasn't going to be scared out of playing Dorian because of not feeling like I could live up to Oscar Wilde's description."

If he did feel pressure, he had a key ally on set to help alleviate it: Colin Firth, whom Barnes calls his mentor. The two became firm friends while making last



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INTERVIEW



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Clockwise from top left Barnes as Dorian Gray; as Prince Caspian in *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*; and as John Whittaker embracing his wife, Larita (Jessica Biel), in the film adaptation of Noël Coward’s play *Easy Virtue*.

year’s Noël Coward adaptation, *Easy Virtue*, in which Barnes, playing a foppish aristocrat moping around his family’s country pile, had very few scenes with Firth but still followed him around “like a besotted puppy.” In *Dorian Gray*, the British duo shares plenty of screen time: Firth portrays Lord Henry Wotton, the cynical aristocrat who tempts Dorian down the path to his doom. “He’s a great person to have in the pub or on the end of a phone,” vouches Barnes. “I giggled every day in his presence.”

The slight, raven-haired actor grew up in Wimbledon, the son of a psychotherapist mother and psychiatry professor father, and fell in love with music before acting, playing drums in his school orchestra, joining the National Youth Music Theatre and briefly attempting to forge a pop career. He winces to this day at his stint in the short-lived boy band Hyrise, who were long-listed as the UK’s Eurovision entry in 2004. “It’s the worst thing I’ve ever done, but I didn’t expect anyone to ever see it,” he groans. (YouTube has granted him unwanted immortality.)

Since switching his artistic allegiance to acting, Barnes cites a chain reaction of good fortune that’s put him in the enviable position he finds himself in now. “I’ve had a lucky run: doing a TV pilot in the States, going straight into *Stardust*, then straight into *Bigga Than Ben*, then straight into *The History Boys* in the West End, and then into *Prince Caspian*,” he summarises. “That has given me the momentum I need to push myself to a place where I can choose between jobs.”

Rather notoriously, Barnes was hired to play Prince Caspian in the eponymous *Chronicles of Narnia* sequel while he was starring as Dakin in a National Theatre revival of *The History Boys*. The ensuing furore (the theatre publicly raked Barnes over the coals for breaking his contract) still causes him anguish. “*The History Boys* was and still is the best job I’ve ever had,” he says softly. “I loved doing it so much, and I felt terrible in those three weeks I knew I was leaving because I felt like I was letting people down. There’s still a small part of me that regrets it having had to be that way.”

Because of the bad publicity? “No, just because I’m a loyal guy and, in a business where there isn’t much loyalty, people could still see it as, ‘He just wanted to get ahead, this crazy, ambitious new boy’ – which I’m really not.”

Although he harbours as much ambition as any actor his age, Barnes does convey a palpable integrity and

genuineness, even down the end of a phone line. Few actors actually bother to answer their own sacks of fan mail, as Barnes makes a monthly effort to do (women’s undergarments are a regular gift), and Firth isn’t the only one of his co-stars to embrace him; even the fearsome Kristin Scott Thomas took to calling Barnes “my little panda” on the set of *Easy Virtue*.

Having just finished filming the thriller *Valediction*, which he calls a “beautiful, tragic story with a European feel to it,” he admits to feeling discombobulated as he heads down under for the *Dawn Treader* shoot. “I’ve been waiting a couple of years for it to happen; I only got the script last week,” he says of the third *Narnia* chapter, which nearly expired after Disney opted to abandon the franchise (another studio, 20th Century Fox, stepped in). “I don’t know what to make of anything at the moment, but *Dawn Treader* is my favourite of the seven books. I think the idea is to get back to more of the fantasy children’s world of the first one. And I know Caspian is going to be very different in this film...” – Barnes pauses and laughs – “because I’m playing him! At least this time around I don’t have to learn how to swing a sword or ride a horse.”

Still an avid musician, Barnes practises the piano every chance he gets. Unlike Dorian Gray, however, he insists his leisure time is never given over to indulging in a wanton-excess lifestyle. “When I work, I throw myself at it as hard as I possibly can, so I need recovery time,” he says. “That doesn’t mean diving into the London club scene; it means catching up on all the books I haven’t read and all the films I haven’t seen and all the friends I’ve neglected.”

Barnes, who shares a small flat in London with his brother (not even big enough to fit his piano in, which stays at his parents’ house), has not only avoided becoming paparazzi bait like some of his more unfortunate contemporaries; he’s also proved adept at keeping his private life shielded. “I understand how volatile and fragile fame is and how unimportant it is at the end of the day,” he says. “I just love what I do, and I want the opportunity to do it for as long as possible.”

Dorian Gray opens on 11th September in the UK

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Premiere, Grazia, The Guardian and Wonderland

Prince Caspian and *Easy Virtue* stills Rex Features