

VOLZTE FASS

The dramatic reversal of fortune in the career of Michael Fassbender has seen him go from jobbing actor to major movie star almost overnight

By MATT MUELLER

Although hardly anyone saw *Hunger*, the film-making debut of Turner Prize-winning artist Steve McQueen, as far as Michael Fassbender is concerned it might as well have been the blockbuster of the millennium, such was its seismic impact on his career. Before McQueen's gut-wrenching, apolitical chronicle of the last six weeks in the life of jailed IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, Fassbender was just another jobbing actor surviving on scraps. But when *Hunger* was shown at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, everyone was blown away by this brave new actor and his gaunt (he shed more than two stone for the role), gutsy turn as the starving IRA inmate. Suddenly Fassbender was fielding calls from Quentin Tarantino.

"Blessed, I feel blessed," he says when we meet at a west London photo studio. His hair grown to a shaggy length, in person the 33-year-old German-born Irish actor is the epitome of rugged handsomeness. His aquamarine eyes pierce, and his jawline looks like it could chisel granite.

Arriving in trainers and a hat before changing into a succession of outfits for the photographer (he's clearly a hat fan - he later leaves with one he wore for the shoot), Fassbender acknowledges the good fortune *Hunger* has bestowed upon him. But proof that his titanic portrayal of Sands was no flash in the pan came last year with two more showcases for his alchemic talent: as the charismatic

but ultimately treacherous father figure in Andrea Arnold's dark council-estate fable *Fish Tank*, and as an undercover agent in Nazi Germany in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. A stroke of luck never hurts, either - Fassbender admits it was his ability to speak German that convinced Tarantino to hire him for his WWII pastiche.

"It was almost like [the role of] Hicox was tailor-made for me," says Fassbender, who played a suave British lieutenant. "But I still had to do a lot of work on it to make sure I didn't sound like an English or Irish person speaking German - just so a German audience wouldn't go, 'Oh, please, he's obviously not German.'"

Fassbender was two when his family - German father Josef and Northern Irish mother Adele - moved from an industrial corner of Germany to Killarney on the west coast of Ireland to work in the hotel trade, eventually opening their own restaurant. Fassbender's mostly idyllic childhood involved gallivanting around County Kerry's green hills, fishing its lakes, and, occasionally, coming in for mild xenophobic grief. "Growing up in Ireland, you've got the Fitzgeralds, the McCarthys - and the Fassbenders," he grins. "My name sticks out a little bit. And you can imagine the combinations that you can put together with a surname like Fassbender."

In his teens, he graduated from scrubbing pots to working behind the bar in his parents' restaurant, but he

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Film stills, clockwise from top left Fassbender as Lt. Archie Hicox in *Inglourious Basterds*; as Quintus Dias in *Centurion*; as Connor (opposite Katie Jarvis) in *Fish Tank*; as Bobby Sands in *Hunger*

had no clue what to do with his life until a school friend convinced him to attend acting workshops. It flicked a switch for Fassbender, and he progressed swiftly from putting on his own stage version of *Reservoir Dogs* ("Quentin was tickled by that") to upping sticks to London to attend the Drama Centre.

His first break came straight out of drama school, when he was cast in the Steven Spielberg/Tom Hanks-produced TV miniseries *Band of Brothers*. From that auspicious beginning, however, Fassbender lapsed into a fallow spell that lasted well into his late twenties, with only sporadic, smallish jobs (episodes of *Holby City* and *Poirot*; Channel 4's racy drama *The Devil's Whore*; one of *300*'s six-pack Spartan warriors) to interrupt his bill-paying gig as a bartender in various London nightclubs. With acting opportunities few and far between, Fassbender even contemplated packing it in for good. "There was a lot of frustration before I was lucky enough to meet Steve McQueen," he admits. "I thought I could run a bar if acting didn't work out."

No danger that he'll ever need to become a full-time mixologist now. These days, his main frustration is finding time to squeeze in all the offers flying his way. In the past year, he's starred as a Roman legionnaire in *Centurion*, played a freelance operative in Steven Soderbergh's upcoming spy thriller *Knockout*, and sunk his chops into the role of a tattooed villain in the comic-book Western *Jonah Hex*. "I'm a nasty piece of work," he laughs. "I throw Megan Fox around and rough her up - it was fun."

So far, 2010 is proving equally frenetic. Fassbender has already finished filming a new version of *Jane Eyre*, playing Mr Rochester opposite *Alice in Wonderland*'s Mia Wasikowska. "Mia is amazing," he vouches. "She's got such a maturity about her, and such an interesting face. I'm really excited about the film." *Jane Eyre* was followed by *A Dangerous Method*, a David Cronenberg adaptation of Christopher Hampton's play about the birth of psychoanalysis. Documenting how Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud went from esteemed colleagues to bitter rivals, Fassbender plays Jung to Viggo Mortensen's Freud, with Keira Knightley on board as a disturbed Russian-Jewish patient and Jung's lover.

"It's a psychological drama with a thriller edge to it," says Fassbender, who picked his older sister's brain to

get to grips with the role (she's an LA-based neuro-psychologist). "Jung's ideas were so explorative. He was definitely less of a conventional thinker than Freud in terms of what the human mind is capable of; he was a very experimental character. I've really got my work cut out."

Not that he's worried, although Fassbender insists a healthy dose of fear is no bad thing when it comes to acting: "It stops you getting lackadaisical." He also claims he's more adept these days at not disappearing too far into a character. Word has it that Fassbender went to some dark places while playing Sands, which - bearing in mind he was living on a starvation diet for two months - isn't wholly surprising. "I used to be very angsty with it all, but I'm getting better at just doing my work and then going home," he says, before adding with a chuckle, "You know, I have friends, and I want to keep them. If you're bringing your work home, it becomes boring for everybody."

Fassbender embraces an actor's transient lifestyle ("I feel at home in most places"), having spent the second half of 2009 in LA, where both his sister and his girlfriend live. But he is delighted he's getting to spend time in Europe this year - either on the *Dangerous Method* shoot in Germany or hanging out in London, buzzing around the city on his Triumph motorcycle.

His LA sojourn was partly to take a breather and partly to reassess his goals now that his career has ramped up to a level he'd probably stopped dreaming was possible in those pre-*Hunger* days. One thing Fassbender is sure of, though, is that he's not in it for short-term gain or fame.

"Brad Pitt is the most famous person I've worked with, and he can't go anywhere without being attacked by a frenzy of people," he says. "That must be tough. But people don't recognise me, and I love that, because I'd much rather be watching other people than have people watching me. Although I was chatting to a bartender in New York recently, and as soon as he found out I was in *Inglourious*, he started quoting from the film. That was pretty cool. I liked that." ■

Jonah Hex opens on 24th September in the UK

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