

THE FUTURE HERO #2

Star man

WORDS MATT MUELLER



Brit actor Jack O'Connell wows as an explosive teen in hard-hitting prison drama **Starred Up** and is taking Hollywood by storm...

Who knew that gobbing at Michael Caine could be a good career move? While shooting a sequence in *Harry Brown* in which his young hoodlum Marky is tortured by Caine during the latter's anti-gang crusade, Jack O'Connell let the spittle fly at the British acting legend. After several takes, Caine, possibly with tongue in cheek but more likely just impressed by his spiky young co-star's brio, shouted "Star of the future!" at O'Connell.

Speaking down the line from Australia, where he's currently starring in Angelina Jolie's second directorial outing *Unbroken*, O'Connell chuckles sheepishly when *Total Film* reminds him of that day. "Yeah, they were his words," he says. "I don't know who told you that, but you didn't hear it here first! He insisted I spit at him for real, which was very open-minded. But yeah: I'm privileged to have had that experience, at a pivotal age, with one of the greats. It was priceless, monumental, and just mental."

Mental can also be used to describe *Starred Up*, a prison drama that sees O'Connell give a powder-keg performance as scary young offender Eric. Not that the Derby-born, Derby-proud O'Connell has gone unnoticed until now. Acting since he was 14, he has featured in *This Is England*, *Eden Lake* and *Private Peaceful*, with a recurring role as hotheaded shagger James Cook in EA's *Skins*. But *Starred Up* is taking O'Connell places, his electrifying presence


prompting Jolie to cast him as Olympic runner Louis Zamperini in her forthcoming adaptation of the best-selling WW2 survival tale.

O'Connell first met *Starred Up* director David Mackenzie (*Young Adam*, *Hallam Foe*) in Berlin when he was working on *300: Rise Of An Empire* in deepest, darkest Bulgaria. "We agreed to meet halfway," says the 23-year-old, who screentested, bagged the part and headed off to Belfast post-*300*, for the toughest gig of his life. Largely filmed in Crumlin Road Gaol, an abandoned Victorian prison, O'Connell was in his element on *Starred Up*. He was driven by past experiences he doesn't want to go into ("not first-hand, thankfully"), and by a determination to show where Eric's boiling rage comes from and how institutionalisation can create a caged animal.

Bringing astonishing authenticity to Eric's multiple blow-ups, O'Connell admits that not blurring the lines with real life wasn't always easy during the six-week shoot. "If it was getting really amped up, you'd have to bear in mind who you were portraying, even if you were just going to the toilet or what have you," he says. "A character like Eric can land you in all sorts of bother." He makes no bones about matters with some of his on-screen tormentors becoming heated enough to spill off-camera – but isn't naming any names. Oh OK: Sam Spruell, who plays the real baddie – a malicious prison guard determined to scupper Rupert Friend's noble efforts to rehabilitate Eric. "We go back, so to speak," O'Connell says about Spruell. But whatever bother occurred on set, it was useful performance fuel in O'Connell's eyes.

Many of Britain's best actors found prominence in angry young man roles, not least Gary Oldman and Tim Roth as ferocious skinheads in Mike Leigh's *Meantime* and *Made In Britain* respectively. Both are inspirations to O'Connell, particularly Oldman, and he feels a huge sense of achievement that he's been tagged as one of Britain's hottest rising stars. "That's what kept me going: the idea that I could one day be here," he says, sounding matter-of-fact rather than boastful. "I've wanted to be recognised as one of Britain's best young actors for as long as I've been acting, so the fact that I've got nominations [*a BIFA Best Actor nod for Starred Up*] and a nice body of work to back me up – that's what I started out for. As long as you keep things exciting to watch, that's what it's about."

After volatile Eric, comes Athenian warrior Calisto in the *300* spin-off, with O'Connell joking that his performance was primarily about getting super-fit. "We definitely spent more time working out than we did acting," he says wryly. That will be followed by his role as Zamperini, the Italian-American track star who met Hitler at the 1936 Olympics and later survived for 47 days at sea after his bomber crashed into the Pacific, before being captured and tortured by the Japanese.

Does he not pinch himself and think: I'm in Australia working with Angelina Jolie! "Every now and then," he laughs. "But then I try and reassure myself that I've concentrated on getting to this place for the last 10 years. I feel prepared." 

Starred up opens on 21 March. 300: Rise Of An Empire opens on 7 March.

Хорошо, что вы
хотите быть одним из
лучших молодых актеров
в Великобритании



'I've wanted to be one of Britain's best young actors for as long as I've been acting'