

# 'THERE ARE SOME CHARACTERS YOU NEVER WANT TO SHAKE OFF'

*The Oscar winner on playing against type in his new film, working with Woody Allen and the role that haunts him still (It's not Darcy)*

By MATT MUELLER

**THERE ARE PERILS** as well as rewards to being an Oscar-winning actor. Although not for lack of trying, Colin Firth is still searching for anything as resonant as *The King's Speech* or *A Single Man*, the double-barrelled salvo that propelled him into heady new leagues as a dramatic screen actor and solo box-office draw. Tom Ford's simmering 2009 adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's novel yielded a first Oscar nomination, before Tom Hooper's monarch's lament ferried Firth over the line the following year, delivering the statuette for his stammering King George VI (he also won a Bafta for both films).

Life after Bertie has seen Firth accept parts good (*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*), trad (*Gambit*) and peculiar (*Arthur and Mike*), but nothing to unduly trouble awards voters or cement his newfound leading-man status. *The Railway Man*, which came out earlier this year, had potential in both regards. Eric Lomax, whose hellish experiences as a British POW on the Burma Railway and subsequent mission of retribution against one of his torturers were documented in a bestselling memoir, was a substantive role and Firth's portrayal earned high praise. But a tepid reception for Jonathan Teplitzky's adaptation scuppered those chances.

Having just jetted in from the south of France, where he's been shooting Woody Allen's latest comedy, *Magic in the Moonlight*, opposite Emma Stone, Firth is still bearing evidence of the pounds he dropped to portray Lomax when we meet in Toronto. It's a city which brings fond memories, not least because *The King's Speech* began its inexorable march towards awards-season glory at the city's annual film festival and 2,500 moviegoers sang "Happy Birthday" to him at its festival premiere. Firth is in town today to discuss a serious film, the true-life crime drama *Devil's Knot*, but the actor's sly humour is much in evidence, as when I ask him whether a project is ever truly finished in his mind. "Sometimes it's all too finished," he quips. "Sometimes it's finished for me almost before it's begun. Then you're just plugging in the electrodes and carrying on."

He's too diplomatic to name names, although it's safe to assume that *Devil's Knot* doesn't fall into that category. It would be hard to feel detached in the face of such harrowing subject matter. Directed by Atom Egoyan, it's the first dramatised account of the notorious "West

Memphis Three" case, in which three young boys were murdered in 1993 in rural Arkansas and three teenagers controversially convicted of the heinous crime. Despite a lack of physical evidence, Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley Jr and Jason Baldwin's penchant for death metal music and dressing in black, combined with Echols's professed Satanic interests, whipped up a paranoid frenzy, with the prosecution asserting a ritual element to the killings. The subsequent miscarriage of justice has been the subject of several documentaries, most notably the *Paradise Lost* trilogy by film-makers Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, and been a cause célèbre for Johnny Depp and Peter Jackson among others. As Firth puts it of the still unsolved case, "it's relentlessly compelling to people".



Couple: Livia and Colin Firth ANDREAS RENTZ/GETTY

The actor plays Ron Lax, a local private investigator who worked pro bono for the defence and uncovered DNA evidence that played a key role in the sentenced trio's 2011 release after 18 years behind bars (albeit under an "Alford" plea, which allowed them to proclaim their innocence while upholding their convictions). Despite an admirable Southern drawl, Firth wasn't interested in doing an impersonation. The two men only spoke briefly on the phone; Firth found him a taciturn sort "not ready with his opinions", but expresses admiration at Lax's integrity in taking a principled stand against collective hysteria.

Interestingly, having been drawn to the project based on his past, happy collaborations with Egoyan and co-star Reese Witherspoon (on *Where the Truth Lies* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* respectively), Firth admits he'd never even heard of the West Memphis Three.

"I knew nothing about it," he concedes, with a touch of frost in his voice. "I wondered if that was just me but I've checked and found it's not unusual to be ignorant of this case."

Perhaps his defensiveness is a symptom of having to plead ignorance at a dreadful episode that destroyed several young lives, as the father of three sons himself. Besides two boys with Livia Giuggioli, now 13 and 11, Firth has a third son from an earlier relationship with actress Meg Tilly. Firth has always stayed in touch with Tilly and Will, who's now in his mid-twenties. Married to Livia for 17 years, he splits his family's time between west London and Italy, and is an avid ecology and human-rights activist alongside his Italian wife. While Firth is especially keen on flying the flag for indigenous peoples and asylum-seekers, Livia crusades for ethical fashion; Colin's mates have been known to wear her wares on the red carpet.

Firth himself can't help but make anything look stylish. As the antique-loving Lax, he makes wide 1990s ties, shapeless suits and George Michael-style face fuzz look like they should be rushed back into fashion, pronto. During our encounter, the ever-suave actor, in his dark tailored suit, white dress shirt and black-rimmed specs, manages to make a dark, drab hotel room feel like glamorous surroundings. Even watching the 53-year-old unbutton his jacket to sit down and casually signal his publicist to bring some water is like a lesson in effortless sophisti- >>>









Shifting gear: Colin Firth with Emma Stone in a scene from *'Magic in the Moonlight'* and (below, from left) in *'Kingsman: The Secret Service'* and *'Devil's Knot'*

SONY; JAAP BLITENDIJK; TIMA ROWDEN

» cation and elegance. The fact that his cerebral synapses clearly fire on all cylinders too (he co-authored an academic paper on research into the human brain three years ago) could spawn jealous thoughts in his fellow males, but Firth's tranquil presence dissipates the rush to envy.

He arrived in Atlanta for the *Devil's Knot* shoot three days after wrapping *The Railway Man* in Australia and admits the abrupt transition felt "very strange." "They were equally dark [stories] and I was playing a real person in both cases but the challenge was very different," says Firth. "In the case of *The Railway Man*, I had to immerse myself in someone else's memories, whereas *Devil's Knot* was about an outsider coming in with no preconceptions and asking questions. On an emotional level it wasn't as onerous. Both stories involve truth being obscured, but it never interests me as much to find connections as to find differences." Although it's based on Mara Leveritt's brilliant book documenting the case, *Devil's Knot* will play best for those who, like Firth, bring little if any knowledge to this tangled, terrible story and are ready to be appalled by it for the first time. Anyone who has watched *Paradise Lost* will find it doesn't add much to the discourse, not least because Egoyan shoots it like a dated made-for-TV whodunnit, although that's an argument Firth dismisses outright. "Atom's not making a documentary," he says. "But it raises the question about the difference between the two. Both are storytelling."

Berlinger and Sinofsky are even depicted in *Devil's Knot*, which Firth insists raises provocative questions. "This whole trial happened in the presence of a crew," he observes. "Everything Damian Eccles did, everything the judge said, every person in that courtroom must have been aware that there were cameras and yet everyone's pretending they're not there. With reality TV – and these were the early days of it – we've learned to be good sports about voyeurism. It's become convention now to ignore the fly on the wall. I find it absolutely crazy. There's that moment in Madonna's movie, the one where she's being followed around by a camera and everyone's pretending it's not there [*In Bed With Madonna*], where Warren Beatty says, 'Why is no one mentioning this? Can you do anything without a camera crew around?'"

Like Madonna, Firth also had his moment as a pop-culture touchstone in the 1990s, his career singularly defined by Mr Darcy in the BBC's *Pride*



and *Prejudice* for more than a decade. For a time, Firth seemed content gliding comfortably along as a period-drama heart-throb, before *A Single Man* and *The King's Speech* altered our perceptions, and likely his own. If he's still navigating those new expectations, his upcoming projects also signify a readiness to take a breather from seriousness and just have some fun.

Of Allen's impending Riviera comedy, Firth says: "I can't tell you anything about it but it was a great experience and not an easy one to walk away from." He also has on the horizon *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, Matthew Vaughn's adaptation of the Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons's comic, in which he stars as a suave secret agent who takes a young upstart under his wing. Having long been touted as a potential 007, Firth was no doubt

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tickled by the chance to tweak the image of the clipped-accented, lethal-force-dispensing British super-spy. This winter, he'll also be giving voice to Paddington in the live-action adventures of the beloved Peruvian bear, directed by *Bunny and the Bull's* Paul King. Although Paddington is being partly brought to life in the motion-capture studio, Firth stopped short of pulling an Andy Serkis. He's sticking to the recording studio for the film. Who knows when or where Firth will find his next *Single Man* or Bertie? He's signed to play the literary editor who steered Fitzgerald and Hemingway to brilliance in Michael Grandage's directorial debut *Genius*, and is primed for another character that will leave a bit of lasting residue. "Asking if it's difficult to shake characters off implies that I want to shake them off," he smiles. "There are certain ones that you welcome to stay around."

Firth cites his role as Aston in an early 1990s stage production of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* and George in *A Single Man* as the two roles he's played which have lingered longest. "There's this irrational sense that those characters are still around somewhere and you have an ongoing relationship with that person," he says, fiddling distractedly with his wedding ring. "I know that Tom Ford felt the same way about George. You feel you might run into him and you want to check up that he's okay, even though if you've seen the film... But he never went away and I don't want him to. Whereas there are others where you just walk off the set and it's absolutely goodbye."

*'Devil's Knot'* is out now