

RT EXCLUSIVE

Carry on Doctor

The new Doctor an evil psychopath? E Jane Dickson discovers that before he makes his Christmas debut, new Time Lord **David Tennant** is enjoying a darker role

We're all of us closer to darkness than we like to admit," says David Tennant. We're not talking outer darkness here – Tennant will deal with that at Christmas when he takes possession of the Tardis as the tenth Doctor in *Doctor Who* (see overleaf for more details) – it's the darkness within that's bothering him right now. And as the psychotic Brendan Block in ITV1's two-part thriller *Secret Smile*, Tennant turns in a performance scarier than any Slitheen.

Adapted from the Nicci French bestseller, *Secret Smile* is the terrifying story of what happens when a common-or-garden creep turns into a psychopath. "There are a couple of jaw-dropping moments," Tennant promises.

"Brendan is very damaged. I suppose that anyone who commits the kind of atrocities Brendan commits is doing it because he's an unhappy, damaged person."

It's the kindest verdict Brendan can hope for. Women watching *Secret Smile* are less likely to make excuses for the plausible monster who, rejected by his girlfriend (played by Kate Ashfield) then takes up with her sister (Claire Goose) and systematically sets about destroying her family, her sanity and, ultimately, her life. "It's that Hitchcockian thing, where somebody, through no fault of their own, finds themselves in a seemingly inescapable situation," says Tennant. "It's a very powerful dramatic concept. What makes it work so well is that 'there but for the grace of God' syndrome. You could meet someone in

a bar tomorrow, and they would be the wrong person, and your life is ruined."

Tennant, a Presbyterian minister's son from Paisley, knows a thing or two about grace. The star of *Takin' Over the Asylum*, *Blackpool* and *Casanova* refers constantly to the "great good fortune" and "privilege" that has shaped his career. But there's a hefty dose of the Calvinist work ethic in there too. Tennant's fast-track to the top owes, you suspect, more to graft than good fortune. "I've always been preposterously singleminded about my career. I was three years old when I decided I wanted to be an actor. I just loved watching people on the telly. I was watching stories being told and thinking 'this is just great'. I think I had a conversation with my

to grow up in the shadow of."

Religion remains "a solid support" to Tennant, but he avoids what he terms "the preachy tendency. Christianity is too often confused with bigotry, especially in the west of Scotland, where the whole Protestant/Catholic nonsense goes on to this day. For me, it's a question of humanity, with that element of not necessarily putting oneself first all the time, which I think is valuable."

It's a creed that has served him well in a profession where ego, it seems, is king. "The whole entertainment world does encourage that kind of thing," he agrees. "Anything that's vocational and oversubscribed is going to necessitate bad behaviour from a certain kind of person. You

"Once you've reached a certain level of success, you can drift quite far from reality"

parents about who these people were in the TV and as soon as I had an understanding that this was a job, that people got paid for telling stories, that was what I wanted to do."

His parents, he recalls, were warmly supportive of this secular vocation. Indeed, Tennant's father, the Very Rev Sandy McDonald (the name change was "an Equity thing"), a former moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, was a source of considerable inspiration to the stage-struck boy. "I've always admired his ability to orate; he's a very powerful and charismatic speaker. I didn't make a conscious correlation to performance until much later, but I'm sure growing up watching that must have had an effect. It's something I felt very lucky

can get some very talented people who are just heartstoppingly out of touch with the world. Once you've reached a certain level of success, you can drift quite far from reality without anyone to stop you. But only," Tennant adds firmly, "if you allow it to happen."

Pretentiousness, it seems, was not an option in Paisley. At school, the arty teenager was beaten up for wearing a bootlace tie ("Fair dos", he says with a wry shrug) and there is a residual Scottish embarrassment about the whole issue of his personal appearance. He describes himself, if pressed, as a "skinny streak of nothing" and seems genuinely perplexed to find himself regarded, post-*Casanova*, as a sex symbol. "Of the kind of parts I've ended up >

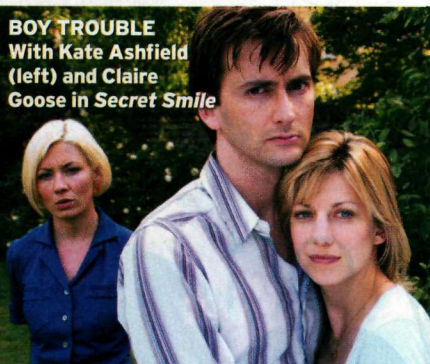


BRIGHT LIGHTS
As lovelorn
DI Carlisle in
Blackpool

< playing, very few have required great physical prowess," he says with evident relief. "Casanova is the closest I've come to somebody who has to look good, but that particular Casanova didn't have to be an Adonis, he was more of a cheeky chappie."

The thought of getting his kit off on screen did, however, propel Tennant to the gym. "Nobody ever suggested that I must or should, but I thought I'd feel more confident in the role if I was feeling more confident physically, so I worked out every single day for five weeks. And then I didn't get to take my shirt off until week ten of filming, by which time it had all gone to pot. So it was a wasted experience, but I've now started going to the gym on a more sane basis. And I've been known to wear moisturiser, which may mean I'll be stopped on the Paisley boundary next time I go home. But I hope I've worked things through enough not to be too concerned about the macho image. I've got my yin and my yang sorted out."

He wriggles a bit, though, on the subject of his love life. He speaks warmly of his former girlfriend, the actress Anne-Marie Duff, but is less forthcoming on more recent incumbents. "Can I please not answer that?" he asks politely, but his beaming smile suggests that things are just fine on the romantic front.



BOY TROUBLE
With Kate Ashfield
(left) and Claire
Goose in *Secret Smile*

It may of course be the yin and yang at war under his pale Scots skin, but Tennant looks like he's blushing. "I always disappoint on the personal questions," he insists. "I have no hobbies or pursuits. I live in north London and drive a Skoda. I'm afraid that's as interesting as it gets." He doesn't make it sound like a brush-off. And there's something in his quick-featured face that makes you believe that this is an actor more

"I still find it impossible to believe that anyone in the arts votes Conservative"

interested in ideas than lifestyle.

His first big job, after drama school in Glasgow, was touring in rep with the political theatre group 7:84 and he's passionate about the power of art to change society. "When I started working in theatre in England," he recalls, "I would meet people, and they would say 'Oh, I voted for Margaret Thatcher.' The first time I heard someone saying that, I honestly thought they were joking. I'd be thinking, 'I have never met anyone from your world. What's it like? Do you roast children over open fires?'"

Tennant, 34, makes a slick job of sending up his wide-eyed youth, but if his manner is more circumspect now, the politics are unchanged.

"I know I shouldn't say this," he goes on, "but I still find it impossible to believe than anyone in the arts votes Conservative. I want to say: 'But you spend your life doing stuff about

the human condition. How can you be in a production of, say, *King Lear*, and vote Tory. Did you not understand it? Or did you just not like it? And if you think Shakespeare got the whole thing wrong, how can you square what you're doing with yourself?'"

Nonetheless, he is wary of nailing his colours to the next big celebrity cause. "You've got to be careful you're not whacking your name onto the cause of the week just because it's voguish. But it's difficult because as soon as you get any kind of profile, the letters just don't stop. You could be a patron of 152 charities in a fortnight. And it's a hard line to draw, because in one way, what right have you to tell anyone anything, other than that they recognise your face. In another way you think, 'Well, if I have the ability to make a difference,

simply by virtue of being who I am at this moment, then do I have the right to ignore that?' If I can put my face to a good cause and raise 50 quid for it, shouldn't I just do it and shut up? It's something I'm still figuring out."

It's a modestly considered response from a newcomer to the big time. And he has a matter of weeks to get fame figured before *Doctor Who* beams Tennant's face into every home in Britain. *Secret Smile* was already underway when he learned that he had been chosen to take up the sonic screwdriver. "I love *Doctor Who*," he says, "but I never expected to be considered for the part. What's lovely, is that the public seem to have thought, 'yeah, he'll do'. [When his casting was announced, comments posted on the official BBC *Doctor Who* website were overwhelmingly in favour of the choice.]

Which, you take it, is Scots for punching the air. He's far too canny to start lording it, as it were, before his time. But David Tennant is ready to go galactic.

LINKS

www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho

Doctor Who: The Christmas Invasion

As if you didn't know, there's a new Doctor in town...

What it's about?

This BBC1 Christmas special has the lot: a killer Christmas tree, spooky Santas, evil aliens and, of course, David Tennant as the new Doctor.

Why watch it?

Who doesn't want to see how Tennant measures up in the role? (the special scene shown in *Children in Need* last month was a promising start) "It's very easy to feel the weight of history pressing down," he admits. "Getting over that and getting on with it is part of the trick of the whole gig, really. When you're playing a scene, that's what you focus on, that over-rides everything."

Time Lord a-leaping

"The only difference [from Christopher Eccleston], really, is that David's a lot lighter on his feet," says Billie Piper, who plays the Doctor's companion, Rose. "He just dances around the set with this kind of puppy-dog energy. I'm friends with a seven-year-old and she was so upset that Chris was leaving, she couldn't understand it or accept the change and I was worried about that. But within three minutes of working with David I thought, 'Don't worry about it. It'll be fine.' They'll love him."

Nick Griffiths



LOVER MAN
"Cheeky chappie"
Casanova, with
Nina Sosanya (left)
and Laura Fraser

