

CULTURE

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Art

'Some of the most eloquent war art ever made': Waldemar Januszczak hails the Chapman brothers

Books

From showbiz to sport: part two of our Christmas roundup

A view to a killer

Matt Smith trades in his sonic screwdriver for a chainsaw



Crazy for you



Look out: the man formerly known as the Doctor is now wielding a chainsaw in American Psycho, the musical.

But it's giving him grey hairs, Matt Smith tells Louis Wise

There is something so yang about Matt Smith, so positive and affirmative, you can't help feeling a little bit yin. The outgoing Doctor, 31, counters the echoing chambers of his face — his creepy hollows, if you will — and a CV of off-kilter roles with the kind of media persona that would make Dolly Parton seem mean. It's an entirely agreeable experience, only it might not reflect well on you. At one point, we dwell on the process of ageing: Smith is at the age where the events of yesterday are now, clearly, The Past. "Do you remember England v Germany?" I assume he means 1990 — Gazza's tears. Of course not. "You know — when we won 5-1?"

Oh, to have a 2001 state of mind. This chipper attitude has stood Smith in good stead as he has weathered the hurricane Who. It's not been slogging down a mine, as he is the first to emphasise, but being the BBC's premier global ambassador takes up an actor's time: 10 months' solid filming a year, plus promotional duties, since 2009. Only 24 days to go now, then he cedes the mantle fully to the peppery Peter Capaldi. He is sad about it, but he fulfilled his original three-year contract. "I could have done it for another three years and been very happy, but..." He is not exactly rubbing his hands with glee at leaving, but I think he will enjoy life outside the bubble. "It's a monk's life, a chaste and staid existence," he says slyly. Ha!

Even now, though, the Time Lord still owns his days. By rights, we should be meeting at the Almeida, that oh-so-Islington theatre in north London. It's there that his new show, *American Psycho*, is set to open. Instead he had to spend all day in London's ExCeL centre, far to the east, for a Doctor Who convention. Thankfully, we meet halfway, at his publicists' office in Soho.

Judging from pictures, I expected Smith to lollop in, an Easter Island statue on stilts, but no — he is buffed up, tall but not giraffe-ish, and seems generally in proportion. Northampton born and bred, he now has the modern actor's accent and lingo: a constellation of norf London (where he lives), BBC drama, LA and, occasionally, Austin Powers ("Whatever gets yer feet groovin', man!"). He takes control of a large sofa and uses its full

potential in our hour together: wriggling, stretching, at one point laid out like a patient in analysis. Yet hysteria seems a fair way off. All that's ailing him is a long fatigue, which makes his answers often peter out in a tired, affable "I dunno...". But if the battery is running flat, he will still give one final bravura performance.

American Psycho, then: what a wonderful way to unwind. "I'm an idiot," he mutters. Smith couldn't be killing off the Doctor better if he tried, playing Bret Easton Ellis's notorious anti-hero Patrick Bateman — the ultimate yuppie, a psychopath trader who dissects the world around him with chainsaw, axe and assorted knives and scalpels. A savage indictment of Wall Street's excesses, the 1991 novel is a period piece, but it has kept a grip on our imagination and its concerns remain depressingly pertinent. The stage version is entirely new. Beforehand, Smith had only seen the tepid 2000 movie version, a long time ago, but he loves the novel now.

"It's quite an interesting thing to make dramatic, because it's an 'experience' in many ways — there isn't a huge narrative arc to it." And it's true, it is more of a wild spiral — but directed by the electric Rupert "Enron" Goold, it should be quite the ride. Goold, formerly of *Headlong*, has taken over the Almeida. It signals a new lease of life for the venue, and it seems right that Smith should add his star power, too. Not that he is just a celeb actor, by any means. Before *Doctor Who* took over his life, he was a real stage presence — most famously in Polly Stenham's zeitgeisty debut, *That Face*. But Bateman should be a challenge: highly conscious yet utterly hollow. "There's a great existentialism to it, in a way, but not, because everything's about the surface," Smith ponders. A beat. "Why not add some songs to the story?"

Ah, yes — it's a musical, too. But don't panic: Ellis's vision might well be perfect for a larger-than-life, theatrical treatment. And serial killers do have form in the genre (see *Sweeney Todd*). The level of violence may still be unpalatable for some, but Smith won't get bogged down in all that. "Hopefully, people are entertained. I think that's what it should do, ultimately. I don't care if they're shocked, as long as they're entertained."

He finished *Who* on a Friday and jumped into

The level of violence may be unpalatable for some — 'I don't care if people are shocked, as long as they're entertained'

rehearsal the following Monday. What's getting to him, giving him "more grey hairs than anything I've ever done", is the singing bit. He has never actually sung before in a professional capacity. "I'm not a West End tenor," he confirms glumly. Instead, he is hoping to, ahem, "inhabit the songs with some acting". There's also dancing, but he seems less alarmed by that.

It's very much in line with what he has done before, though it may not be immediately apparent. The Doctor may be good, and Bateman, well, not, but there are parallels. "There's a weird alienness about them both, and they have an inability to connect with everyone else around them." Weiridos? No. "They're just weird. Which is alluring, somehow."

And, of course, both have style — a Marmite one, maybe, but it's there. This suits Smith right down to the ground. "I'm a sucker for a good costume, yeah," he chuckles. He has been noted for his clobber, on screen and off: someone even once made a Tumblr page called No Seriously Matt Smith, What Are You Wearing? Today he is wearing an ambitious jumper — all mottled turquoise and greys — plus jeans, Converse and polka-dot socks. There's also a bright red leopard-print scarf — Vuitton by the looks of it. So the clothing happily maketh the man. Yet it hasn't always helped him: when his Doctor first appeared, he looked too modish for some. But that was a deliberate change of gear after David Tennant, and it seems to have paid off.

Whether or not you think he's a bit too trendsome, it is quite refreshing talking to someone who is so obviously up for the here and now. He likes the new Arcade Fire album ("the amount of sound they produce"), he loved Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master*. And, of course, he lurrvvved *Drive*. "Ah, that great bit where he walks up in the mask, to that song. And the colours... It's sort of 'on trend'," he sighs contentedly. He didn't say "on trend" ironically, I think.

How to Catch a Monster, the movie he has just filmed for Ryan Gosling — the latter's directorial debut — is, he says, "a mixture between Lynne Ramsay and David Lynch", and that's very much to his taste. He plays, for a change, a "f***** lunatic" called Bully. Again, he had a good costume, from the designer who worked on *Drive*, he says gleefully, so he asked for "a really cool coat" and had a "horseshoe that hung as a belt". The project also



**'It's a monk's life':
Matt Smith**

allowed him a liberating buzz cut, finally ditching that Doctor quiff. And phew, isn't he glad to be rid of that ruddy bow tie? He looks crestfallen. "No! Why? Do you not...?" Well, no, not really, but it's clearly time to back-pedal. It's just nice to cut loose, right? "It was quite liberating to buzz the hair. Although I then had to wear a wig for the Christmas special, which wasn't liberating."

He denies recent rumours linking him to the new Star Wars movies. It's probably a "sci-fi crossover thing", he suggests — Whovians wanting to send him back into space. "But hey, look, I'm totally open to the idea." When the stage show is done, he says he wants a long, hot holiday, but then, still young and "unattached", he might move abroad, possibly to New York. Presumably, that monk's existence will cease, too?

"Do you think I go to a lot of things?" Well, I say, I see you in certain party pages a fair bit. "I go to things to support my friends..." he begins. Oh, that old chestnut. "I mean, if a glass of champagne is there, fine. But I don't just go to a random film premiere, I go if a friend is in it. Or, if it's a fashion show, I go if someone I know is in it. Or I go to a fashion dinner... if they're giving me a new suit." He bursts out laughing and retracts. Kind of. "That's where all the hot chicks are!"

It's possible, though, that he really doesn't go to that much — just that he's papped every time. Is he OK with the press intrusion? "Ah, man, what's 'OK with it'?" He gives quite a graceful spiel on the matter, says some paparazzi are even quite nice, but recounts a situation only the previous week when he opened the door at 8.30am and found a photographer outside it. He had no idea what for. "What I find weird is people saying, 'Well, you did sign up for it.' Sign up for what? People outside my house in the morning? I didn't sign up for that."

He seems to prefer the grand flourish to forensic detail. "It's quite hard to talk about your 'art' or your job if you're an actor without sounding like a dick," he says, a little pained. The battery is dying; as he considers the roles he does, and why, he gets a little lost. "It's interesting, consciousness and all that. I don't know, it's all very interesting..." Then, suddenly, he picks up. "Dreams!" Oh, no. "I swear! I've worked with a lot of actors who are really into dreams." An actor's dreams. Oh, please, no.

"No, I know," he says. "This is the thing. If you were going to open a magazine and see an interview with an actor saying, 'Oh, yeah, I consider my dreams', you'd be like, 'Oh my God — chill out, old boy.'" He gives up again. "Oh, whatever works, man, you know? Whatever gets you through life and makes you smile." And there he is, really, somewhere between a puppy you could tickle and a bubble you should prick. Yang, yang, yang. ☐

American Psycho previews from Tuesday at the Almeida, London N1